



NUI MAYNOOTH

Cliaicéil na hÉireann Má Nuad

**Marxism After Modernism: Anglo-American Leftist
Theorisations of Modernism in the Later Twentieth Century**

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SUMMARY

This dissertation considers the manner in which a number of key Marxian intellectuals from the Anglo-American cultural left, including Perry Anderson, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, Raymond Williams, Rosalind Krauss and others, have attempted to make sense of both literary high modernism and the modernist avant-gardes. The study argues that in the period since the 1960s especially, the Marxian cultural left has helped to redefine our understanding of modernism in a number of significant ways. Chapter One considers how key Marxist intellectuals developed the concept of uneven development to challenge the almost orthodox assumption that modernism was overwhelmingly associated with metropolitan and urban milieux. Chapter Two examines how the issue of imperialism moved from the margins of Marxist cultural criticism to the core of debates about the origins and political character of modernism. The focus of Chapter Three is the American and European theorisations of the historic and contemporary avant-gardes. In Chapter Four I consider how Fredric Jameson's seminal text on postmodernism challenged Marxists to not only rethink how they understood postmodernism but also to recondition how they thought about modernism as well. Finally, Chapter Five concludes by considering the specific instance of Irish modernism. Marxian engagements with Irish modernists from Joyce to Beckett offer an exemplary sense of the wider shifts in left-wing responses to modernism over the course of the twentieth century.

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INTRODUCTION

Marxism and Modernism in the Later Twentieth Century

INTRODUCTION

Marxism was one of the twentieth century's defining political and ideological forces. At some point in the course of that century the left has played a significant role in the history of almost every country across the globe, including major 'First World' states such as France, Germany and Italy, as well as major 'Second' and 'Third World' states such as Russia, China, India and Brazil. The 1960s was a particularly important landmark in the history of left.¹ It was the decade that saw the emergence of a New Left which rejected both the dogmatism of Stalinism and the orthodoxy of Social Democracy. This New Left embraced a more critical style of Marxism and merged it with a commitment to radical democracy and an openness to a broad array of political ideas and alliances. It sought to embody the best features of the socialist tradition, and located them in social struggles such as feminism, the campaign for nuclear disarmament, gay rights and other countercultural movements. By the Spring of 1968, this New Left version of Marxism had reached the height of its intellectual and political influence. The student revolts, the opposition to the Vietnam War, the US Civil Rights movement, and the simultaneous crisis in the labour market collectively created a resurgence in political and class conflict. Marxism became both the political language and the theoretical perspective for a whole generation of radicals who found it the most suitable intellectual vehicle for understanding war,

¹ See Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959-1972* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974), Thomas Albert Koelble, *The Left Unravelled: Social Democracy and the New Left Challenge in Great Britain and West Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) and Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004).

imperialism, racial and class inequalities and the socio-economic functioning of Western democracy.²

However, by the mid-1970s this transformational ambition had collapsed and the subsequent history of the left was characterised more by failure, defeat and political exhaustion or defection than by the utopian possibilities of socialism. The left suffered an extended and ongoing intellectual crisis as Marxism faced challenges from feminism, the gay rights movement, postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism. Many of these movements were openly hostile to Marxism, critiquing its privileging of the proletariat as the key subject of history, charging it with eurocentricism or heterosexism, or even critiquing its very epistemological foundations.³ Even critics sympathetic to Marxism struggled to make sense of the contemporary political moment and argued that the left needed to situate itself in a wider field of radical movements rather than to try to command that field or give leadership to it.⁴

Intellectually, a series of alternative theoretical discourses began to dominate the scholarly territory previously occupied by Marxism; these included structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and postmodernism. However, as Perry Anderson has argued, the declining prestige of Marxism in post-1960s intellectual life cannot be simply explained away by reference to Marxism's

² See George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Cambridge, MA.: South End Press, 1987) and Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

³ See Terry Boswell and Christopher Chase-Dunn, *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism: Toward Global Democracy* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

⁴ A good sampling of the variety of different views within the intellectual Marxian left during this period is contained in *Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective*, Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) and Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg and Carole Biewener eds., *Marxism in the Postmodern Age: Confronting the New World Order* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995). Some of the most creative contemporary critical social theories have come from outside the Marxist tradition, such as Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society: A Theory of Societal and Political Processes* (New York: Free Press, 1968) and *The Moral Dimension: Towards a New Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1980). See also Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Politics: A Work In Constructive Social Theory*, 3 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

'intellectual defeat at the hands of a superior alternative'.⁵ What Anderson means here is that the declining influence of Marxism within European radical and critical theory cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the history of ideas, but must also be understood within a wider social and political context.

Unable to articulate a substantive utopian future once the tumult of the 1960s gave way to the global economic recession of the seventies, Marxism found itself in a political crisis as it faced into the new millennium. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc states, the embrace of capitalism by China, the surrender of the Social Democratic left to the 'inevitability' of neo-liberalism and the decline in unionisation and the power of the organised left across Western industrialised countries all contributed to the collapse of credible alternatives to capitalism in its increasingly globalised form. For the first time since the mid-nineteenth century, the left represented a minority position within the most significant social and political movements of the period; for a younger generation struggles around ecology, feminism, AIDS, development and anti-globalisation seemed more pressing matters than the fate of socialism or of the working classes.⁶

This political shift was most potently articulated by right-wing academic Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 article 'The End of History'.⁷ Although first published before the events which made it notorious – the east European revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – Fukuyama's thesis acquired its intellectual force from the process of which they were the culmination, the collapse of Stalinism. History, for Fukuyama, is the struggle of rival ideologies. He argued

⁵ Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983), 56.

⁶ For overview of this period, see Göran Therborn, 'After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World', *New Left Review*, Vol. 2, No. 43 (March-April 2007), 63-114, and 'Dialectics of Modernism: On Critical Theory and the Legacy of Twentieth-Century Marxism', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 215 (May-June 1996), 59-81.

⁷ See Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), 3-16 and 'A Reply to My Critics', *The National Interest*, No. 18 (Winter 1989), 20-28. These articles were developed into the 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

that the discourse of the market economy and liberal democracy had turned out to be the final form in which aspirations potentially common to all human beings can be shared. Earlier forms of governments were, he argued, 'characterised by grave defects and irrationalities' which resulted in their 'eventual collapse', but liberal democracy 'was arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions'. Fukuyama is not arguing that liberal democracy represents a perfect system, but rather that all attempts to achieve a viable alternative have failed. In other words, he writes, 'the *ideal* of liberal democracy could not be improved upon'.⁸

Fukuyama's thesis was rigorously critiqued from both the left and the right. His critics on the right contended that he had dangerously underestimated the strength of liberal capitalism's opponents while those on the left argued that liberal capitalism was characterised by increasing levels of inequalities that would eventually provoke a formal challenge to parliamentary democracy.⁹ However, as Perry Anderson pointed out in his critique of Fukuyama, an effective left-wing challenge to Fukuyama's thesis cannot be content with simply articulating the manifold problems and contradictions inherent within liberal capitalism; it must be able to articulate a viable alternative to liberal capitalism, a task the left have singularly failed to achieve in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ It is this inability to meet the aspirations of a generation radicalised by the social movements of the 1960s that continues to haunt the contemporary left.

⁸ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, xi. [Fukuyama's emphasis]

⁹ Not all of the left responses were inherently hostile to Fukuyama. Indeed Fukuyama himself remarked that his most receptive responses in Europe came from the left. For some on the left, Fukuyama's thesis represented a welcome release from postmodernist hostility towards metanarratives and, as Gregory Elliott has commented, Fukuyama's work 'resurrected totalizing and globalising theory as an indispensable mode of conceptualization of the "One World" impending on the threshold of the twenty-first century.' See Gregory Elliott, 'The Cards of Confusion', *Radical Philosophy*, No. 64 (1993), 3-12. Fukuyama's work initiated a wide-ranging debate on the direction of world history, the nature of modern society and the fate of the left. For an overview of this debate, see Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 15-43.

¹⁰ Perry Anderson, 'The Ends of History' in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), 279-375.

Yet, paradoxically, notwithstanding all of these crises and challenges, the closing decades of the twentieth century proved to be a period of distinguished intellectual, if not political, achievement, for Marxism, in particular for the Anglo-American cultural left. In the various academies and intellectual circles of the Anglophone world, Marxism has been at the centre of debates in literary theory, offering sustained and differentiated engagements with literature against which most other modes of literary and critical theory have defined themselves. From the 1960s onwards, traditions of thought associated with existentialism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism have all developed through critical dialogues with Marxism.¹¹ Moreover, figures such as Perry Anderson, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti and Raymond Williams have all exerted a major influence on literary and intellectual debate in the United States, Britain and beyond. Other left-of-centre intellectuals such as Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss have been equally central to contemporary intellectual debates on culture and the arts more generally, opening up whole new areas of scholarship. All of these key figures came to political maturity in the 1960s and found their intellectual thinking shaped in important, sometimes crucial, ways by the key figures in the Western Marxist tradition such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernest Bloch and Georg Lukács.

A number of important left-wing journals such as *New Left Review*, *October*, *Monthly Review* and *The Nation* established an international reputation in this period and continue to be widely read, even now, several decades later. These journals are translated into many languages other than English and remain key sites for

¹¹ Marxism continues to be included in major anthologies of critical theory such as Fred Rush, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Second Edition (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

ideological debates and discussions about politics, culture and the arts. However, for the purposes of this dissertation the intellectual coterie that developed around *New Left Review* (*NLR*) will be key. *NLR* was founded in 1960 and involved the fusion of two intellectual journals, both characterised by an independent socialist opposition to Stalinism and a critique of social democracy, *The New Reasoner* and the *Universities and Left Review*. *NLR* quickly established itself as the key theoretical journal of the New Left and its success was proved in terms of sales (9000 readers subscribed in 1960, by 2000 that had increased to 40,000 subscribers) and the interest which surrounded its appearance with even the media recognising the journal as an important political phenomenon.¹² In 1962 the original editorial team around the historian Edward Thompson was replaced by a group headed by Perry Anderson. Anderson proposed to make *NLR* the British equivalent of *Les Temps Modernes*, the French journal founded by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945. Although *NLR* was published in Britain, and most of its contributing writers were based there or in the United States, its internationalist outlook and politics and its wide readership made it a transnational journal.

NLR also developed its own publishing house in the 1970s, New Left Books which later became known as Verso. New Left Books was responsible for the translation in English of some of the classic works by key figures in the European Marxist tradition such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Ernest Mandel. One of the key publications by New Left Books was the 1977 collection *Aesthetics and Politics*, which made available to English-speaking audiences, for the first time, the key texts of the 1930s Marxist debates on modernism by Brecht, Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno and Bloch.¹³

¹² Kenny, *The First New Left*, 24.

¹³ Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New left Books, 1977).

As we will see, nearly all of the figures discussed in this dissertation have featured prominently in *New Left Review* at some point in their career and the majority have also had work published by New Left Books/Verso.

Despite rather remarkable achievements in the field of cultural debate, there have been no major studies of the Anglo-American left in the period between 1960 and 2000. There are several English-language studies of the earlier German Left of the 1930s and of the Frankfurt School, but no comparable review of the contemporary field of Anglophone left-wing debate has yet been produced.¹⁴ There have been some historical surveys of the British New Left, but these are essentially sociologies of the formation of the movement rather than reviews of its intellectual debates, which were often transatlantic in character or engaged with new challenges from France and Italy and which were therefore never just domestically British in orientation.¹⁵ In recent years there have also been some studies of major left-wing individuals within the Anglo-American left including Raymond Williams, Perry Anderson, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Edward Said.¹⁶ These, however, are

¹⁴ For studies of the European left see, Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Brecht, Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). There are also a number of important German-language studies of the Frankfurt School: see Helmut Dubiel's *Wissenschaftsorganisation und Politische Erfahrung: Studien zur frühen Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt, Schurkamp Verlag, 1978), the English language edition of which appeared in 1985 as *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, Martin Jay and Benjamin Gregg trans. (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). Rolf Wiggershaus's, *Die Frankfurter Schule* (Munich: Carl Haner Verlag, 1986), the English language edition of which appeared in 1985 as *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, Michael Robertson trans. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

¹⁵ See David Widgery, *The Left in Britain 1956-68* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), Paul Blackledge, Perry Anderson eds., *Marxism and the New Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2004), Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) and Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ On Edward Said, see Abdirahman A. Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (London and New York: Verso, 2002) and Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000). On Terry Eagleton, see David Alderson, *Terry Eagleton* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). On Perry Anderson, see Gregory Elliott, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless*

author-centred studies rather than surveys of the wider intellectual field. This work is very different to all of these in that it does not attempt to chart the career of a specific individual within the Anglo-American left or of a particular coterie, movement or tendency within Western Marxism.

The aim of this dissertation is to track some of the key areas of intellectual engagement that have defined the Anglo-American cultural left from the late 1960s to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The primary objective of this thesis, therefore, is not to offer a critique of the Anglo-American left in this period but to argue that collectively the work of these left-wing intellectuals on the relationship between Marxism and modernism constitutes an important field of ongoing debate that needs to be recognised as such. Essentially, what I will be arguing is that even at a time of political recession key left-wing figures such as Anderson, Williams, Eagleton, Jameson, Said and Moretti have continued to occupy commanding positions in the field of literary and cultural debate. In the adjacent fields of the visual and fine arts, left-wing figures such as T. J. Clark, Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster have also been extremely influential, especially in the United States, demonstrating that Marxism's critical and intellectual vitality extended beyond the novel or poetry into other domains as well. All of the authors mentioned here have produced substantial bodies of critical works that have not only extended the intellectual legacy of Western Marxism into the late twentieth century but that have also frequently defined some of the ways in which we now make sense of twentieth-century literature and art. Certainly, no student or academic of any intellectual

Laboratory of History (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson: Marxism and the New Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2004). On Fredric Jameson, see Sean Homer, *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995) and Christopher Wise, *The Marxian Hermeneutics of Fredric Jameson* (New York: Lang, 1995). On Raymond Williams, see Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Terry Eagleton, ed., *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989).

ambition working in recent decades in these areas would want to ignore the scholarship of these figures. Works such as *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), *Orientalism* (1978), *The Political Unconscious* (1981), *Literary Theory* (1983), *The Country and the City* (1985), *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), *Modern Epic* (1996) and *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998) continue to exercise a strong shaping influence on literary and cultural studies today. One of my ambitions in this dissertation is to track how the works of these leading figures in the Anglo-American cultural left respond to each other's works and to show how new conceptions of modernism gradually emerged from their intellectual interactions with each other.

For all the figures mentioned here, the fate of literary and artistic modernism has been an abiding preoccupation. The anti-capitalist and sometimes revolutionary impetus of modernism, especially that of the radical modernist avant-gardes, created a sense of affinity between modernism and Marxism that has obviously been important to all of the theorists whose works will be examined in this thesis. Moreover, the decline of modernism and its apparent displacement by postmodernism after the 1960s has run more or less concurrently with the high and ebb tide of Marxism's own political fortunes. Therefore, when these figures contemplate the crises of modernism in the period after the Second World War they are undoubtedly contemplating the larger cultural-intellectual watershed that was to produce an extended crisis for Marxist theory also. For these theorists, in other words, modernism was not only the most accomplished but also the most daring art of the twentieth century, and in attempting to make sense of what happened to modernism they are also attempting to track what happened to innovative and

transformative impulses in society more generally. The major thrust of this dissertation, then, will be to examine some of the ways in which these left-wing theorists made sense of modernism in a moment when they allow that it has been superseded by something else that is generally termed 'postmodernism'. As we will see later, the works of Anderson, Williams, Eagleton, Jameson, Said and others are continually approaching this topic from a series of vantage points and it is quite clear that their understandings of the topic are continually shifting and continually influenced by each other.

There are important points of continuity to be made between these Anglo-American debates and the earlier debates involving the Frankfurt School on the association between Marxism and modernism. The structure of the contemporary debates finds its origins in the critical discussions on modernism by Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. In 1934, Lukács's sharp ideological denunciation of modernism set the stage for a series of interconnected debates and exchanges on the politics of modernism by Marxist intellectuals of the period. In exile before the Second World War, Bloch and Lukács polemicised against each other over the nature of expressionism. Brecht attacked Lukács for literary formalism. Benjamin disputed the respective merits of classical and modern works of art with Brecht. Adorno challenged Benjamin's hermeneutics, and criticised Brecht's poetics and Lukács's politics. In his overview of the period, Perry Anderson singled out the contribution of these five intellectuals, arguing that: 'The cultural and ideological focus of Western Marxism has . . . remained uniformly predominant from first to last. Aesthetics, since the Enlightenment the closest bridge of philosophy to the concrete world, has exercised an especial and constant attraction for its theorists. The great wealth and variety of the corpus of writing produced in

this domain, far richer and subtler than anything within the classical heritage of historical materialism, may in the end prove to be the most permanent collective gain of this tradition'.¹⁷ The debates around modernism during this period produced important advances in Marxist theories of the relationship between commodity fetishism and modern cultural life, and the concept of production was extended to include the artistic and literary realms.

However, these earlier Marxist intellectuals were writing about modernism when it was still a dynamic contemporary movement. When Lukács wrote about Joyce or Mann, when Benjamin discussed the theatre of Brecht, or Adorno debated the contributions of Schoenberg and Beckett to modernism, they were writing about their own contemporaries. In addition, the emergence of fascism as a dangerous and gathering political force in the Europe of the 1930s added a heightened political urgency to the debates. When Anderson, Eagleton, Jameson, Said or Williams write about modernism in the closing decades of the twentieth century they are, in contrast, writing about a phenomenon that is already largely historical and one which has been largely displaced by other concerns such as postmodernism or postcolonialism. They are also writing at a time when capitalism is relatively stable and when interests have shifted; new questions have been posed about the eurocentricism of modernism and Marxism alike. Feminism has also emerged as one of the dominant intellectual discourses within the academy and the relationship between modernism and gender politics has become a serious topic of investigation and debate.¹⁸ Moreover, the mass cultural industries are no longer emergent, as they were when Adorno, Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School began to theorise them. Modernist techniques have now

¹⁷ Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 78.

¹⁸ See, for example, Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), Ann Ardis and Leslie Lewis, *Women's Experience of Modernity 1875-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) and Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

become absorbed into the advertising industries of an increasingly consumer-orientated society. So while these contemporary Anglo-American left-wing intellectuals debates can, in part, be understood as assimilating and refining the Continental European debates of the mid-twentieth century, they are also historicising modernism and responding to some of the major critiques emerging from their own contemporaries as well.

The object of this study is to offer an outline sketch or relief map of Anglo-American debates on modernism and to assess the important contributions made by these more recent Marxist or left-wing scholars to modern cultural criticism. I will argue that the Anglo-American left in recent decades has made an important contribution to understanding modernism historically and that it has helped to develop strong materialist analyses to explain the emergence of modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many of these contemporary Marxist or left-wing scholars emphasise the importance of extending cultural inquiry beyond an exclusively Western-centred arena of analysis by arguing that the history of European empire helped to shape the cultural landscape of modernism more than was earlier realised. The Marxist interventions into the debates on postmodernism have also produced an important cultural critique of consumer capitalism and the contemporary moment.

The first four chapters of this dissertation will consider thematically four defining Marxist cultural debates on modernism, while the fifth and final chapter will explore some of the ways these different debates converge by focusing on modernism in the context of Ireland. In Chapter One, 'Uneven Developments: Rethinking the Historical and Geographical Coordinates of Modernism', we will consider how the work of Perry Anderson and Terry Eagleton began to challenge the

almost orthodox assumption that modernism was exclusively associated with metropolitan and urban culture. Anderson and Eagleton contended that if modernism was the art of the metropolitan core, then surely London, home to one of the most thriving modern industrial and imperial cultures in the world, would have produced some of the most decisive modernist movements. It is commonly agreed, however, that while London was host to many modernist movements, Britain did not produce a significant domestic modernism. One provisional conclusion that emerged from the work of Anderson and Eagleton was that modernism emerged not in the metropolitan cities of Europe and North America but in unevenly developed, semi-peripheral regions where the contradictions of modernity were experienced more acutely. The work of Raymond Williams, drawing on postcolonial theory, added a further dimension to this reconception of the geography of modernism by introducing the topic of empire and transcending the national framework of discussions on modernism that had characterised the seminal works of Anderson and Eagleton.

The relationship between modernism and imperialism is taken up in more detail in Chapter Two, 'The Shadow of Empire: Marxism, Modernism and the Subject of Imperialism'. The shift in terminology, discussed in Chapter One, from 'modernism and the city' to the relationship of modernism to 'uneven development' and 'the modern and the non-modern' directed Marxists almost inevitably towards a discussion of the issue of imperialism. It is often assumed that the left took up the question of empire only under pressure from postcolonial criticism in the 1980s, but I want to argue here that Marxist critics had begun to work on this topic, however fitfully, from the 1980s onwards. Much of the work, as we will see, was centred on Joseph Conrad, a key figure in contemporary debates about the emergence of modernism and the relationship between modernism and empire.

Despite the emergence of postcolonial criticism in 1980s, the effects of the imperial system on modernist writing went largely untheorised. Within the Anglo-American left, a number of its key intellectual figures – Edward Said, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton – began tentatively to address the relationship between modernism and imperialism in a number of controversial essays. Modernism was reconceived as cultural form that emerged partially in response to the crisis and collapse of empire. The result of these critical debates was that the topic of imperialism moved from the margins of Marxist cultural criticism to the core of debates about the origins and political character of modernism. This shift in emphasis will be explored through an analysis of Said's, Jameson's and Eagleton's writings on Joseph Conrad.

The theoretical dominance of postmodernism in the 1970s and the 1980s meant that the categories of both modernism and the associated avant-gardes came under renewed scrutiny. The dialectical relationship between modernism and the avant-garde is, therefore, explored in Chapter Three, 'Whatever Happened to the Avant-Gardes? Marxist Analyses from Greenberg to Bürger and Beyond'. The scope of Chapter Three extends beyond the parameters of the Anglo-American left to include European or Continental Marxism, but there is an important reason for this theoretical extension. No field of debate is ever entirely self-contained and, as we have already argued, the Anglo-American intellectuals that are the subject of this study have all been shaped by the rich inheritance of European Marxism. The modernist avant-gardes were enormously active and influential in Europe, but never emerged in any significant form in Britain, and materialised only very late in the United States. Therefore, it is not surprising that the most significant contribution to the discussions on the avant-garde came from European Marxists. This chapter will

begin by assessing how Clement Greenberg, once a leading American Marxist cultural theorist, developed an influential theory of the avant-garde that did a great deal to shape American understandings of modernism as essentially an art of purely formal experimentation. Greenberg's celebration of the avant-gardes remained a seminal work – its influence on late-twentieth century intellectuals such as Susan Sontag is evident – and this formalist conception of modernism was given a renewed lease of life when French poststructuralist theory also construed modernism essentially as an art of formal or semiotic experimentation.¹⁹ The works of Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger sounded a much stronger critical note than Greenberg did, however, and Bürger's argument in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) that the whole project of the avant-gardes had failed and was now historically exhausted represented a sharp turning point in late-twentieth-century understandings of modernism. Bürger's theory of the avant-garde soon became something of an orthodoxy in its own right, but it continues to be challenged and contested by some influential left-wing American art theorists such as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster. Chapter Three, then, tracks some influential American and European theorisations of the avant-garde. It begins with Greenberg and American modernism, then examines Bürger's reconfiguration of the debate in his discussion of the European avant-gardes, and returns in a closing section to consider some late-twentieth-century American and French responses to Bürger's work and to the contemporary avant-gardes as they exist today.

The arguments in Chapter Three naturally lead to a discussion of postmodernism itself, and specifically to the relationship between Marxism and postmodernism. Chapter Four, 'Capturing Postmodernism: Fredric Jameson's

¹⁹ See Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Deli, 1969).

Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism' (1991) will focus on Fredric Jameson's work on postmodernism. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Marxism was rarely mentioned in anything but disparaging terms in discussions of postmodernism and it was usually accused of being reductive, determinist and authoritarian in nature. Any attempt to create what Jean François Lyotard described as historical 'grand narratives' was said to be simply an effort to project the subjective desires of the particular theorist onto a necessarily fragmented and atomised reality. Any attempt to act on such reductive theories could only result in dogmatically compelling others to share in discourses which were not their own. Such coercion would lead, ultimately, to the Gulag. Not surprisingly, many Marxists came to view postmodernism and poststructuralism as reactionary right-wing intellectual developments and to dismiss both postmodern theory and postmodern art as conservative and debilitated. Though many major Marxist theorists were to write in the 1980s and 1990s about postmodernism, I have opted to concentrate my chapter on Jameson's seminal text not only because it continues to be the most influential left-wing analysis of its kind but also because it has obviously reconditioned how we now think about modernism as well.

Finally, in Chapter Five, 'Repudiation and Reconciliation: Ireland as Case Study of Changing Marxist Engagements with Modernism', we will consider a specific instance of modernism – the case of Ireland. This chapter is divided into two parts. Firstly, it will focus on the reception of Irish modernist writers, namely Joyce and Beckett, within Marxist cultural criticism. A consideration of the reception of these two writers, historically, within the Marxian critical tradition allows us to understand the general trajectory of Marxist literary and cultural criticism on modernism over the course of the twentieth century. On the one hand, we have the

outright rejection of modernism as a symbol of bourgeois decadence, exemplified by both the Soviet condemnation of Joyce's *Ulysses* and by Lukács's rejection of modernism as formalistic and fragmented. On the other hand, we have the enthusiastic embrace of modernism as an exemplary response to the alienation of the human subject in the modern world, as exemplified by Adorno's writing on Beckett. While these two perspectives on modernism do not represent the entire gamut of Marxian responses to Irish modernism, they do offer us an exemplary sense of the wider shift in Marxist responses to modernism over the course of the last century. We can conclude from this section that what both of these different European Marxist perspectives on modernism share is the fact that they almost entirely ignore the Irish context of Beckett's and Joyce's writing.

The second part of Chapter Five, concentrating on Terry Eagleton's materialist overview of Irish modernism in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995), will consider some of the wider thematic concerns of this thesis by discussing them in terms of Irish modernism. Modernism in Ireland can sometimes seem aberrant, if judged by European and American standards, and it fails to conform to many of the Marxist conceptions of modernism that will feature in this study. Ireland, for instance, produced a high modernist literary culture but no significant avant-garde of the kind that revolutionised art in Europe. This final chapter will consider how Eagleton has made sense of a modernism that seemed so aberrant. Throughout the 1980s a number of left-leaning Irish critics, influenced by postcolonial theory, began to offer historical-materialist type readings of Joyce and, to a lesser extent, Beckett. Eagleton's important essay 'The Archaic Avant-Garde' in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* attempts, I will suggest, to synthesise these Hibernicised literary readings

with the Marxist materialist conceptions of modernism that the Anglo-American left had fashioned over the preceding decades.

The Marxian theorists who are the subject of this dissertation developed their theoretical projects at a time when Marxism had suffered enormous defeats in the political world and was under constant intellectual fire in the academic world. The debates about modernism developed in their works took shape in an historical moment when modernism was viewed by many as *passé* and was dismissed as elitist, sexist and eurocentric. Rather than dismissing modernism in moralistic terms, these theorists have attempted to build on the works of an earlier generation of Continental European Marxists to produce more sophisticated historical and geographical accounts of the emergence and decline of modernism and a more nuanced balance sheet of its political and aesthetic accomplishments and limitations. Moving beyond the repudiation of modernism of the type produced by Lukács and beyond celebrations of modernism of the kinds exemplified in various ways by Adorno or Greenberg, the Anglo-American left in recent decades has developed an analysis of modernism as an historical phenomenon that was inflected by a complex mix of both radical and conservative impulses.

This dissertation attempts to show some of the ways in which Anglo-American leftist thinking on modernism has evolved across the later decades of the twentieth century. The works of key figures such as Anderson, Eagleton, Williams, Jameson and Said, I will argue, can often be shown to be engaged in subtle negotiations not only with earlier European Marxists but also with each other in ways that have not yet been traced in any detailed or systematic fashion. I cannot hope here to chart the entire history of late-twentieth-century Marxist conceptions of modernism or to engage with feminist, poststructuralist, deconstructionist or other

interventions on that subject, interesting and important though these undoubtedly are. But by charting the changing contours of how some decisive left-wing Anglo-American cultural theorists have engaged with modernism in the era of the latter's disappearance into history I hope to make a small but not insignificant scholarly contribution to the cultural history of the left in our times.

CHAPTER ONE

Uneven Developments: Rethinking the Historical and Geographical Coordinates of Modernism

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

It was once an almost settled assumption that modernism was the art of the modern Euro-American metropolis. Modernism, it was believed, had emerged in the great urban capitals of Western Europe, Russia or the United States, and the great literary, musical, cinematic and visual experiments of the modernist avant-gardes were viewed as attempts to give aesthetic expression to the excitement and dissonance of modern urban and industrial life. The tendency to associate modernism with twentieth-century urban experience was fundamental to a number of key twentieth-century theorists of modernism including Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Lewis Mumford and Franco Moretti.¹ Many of modernism's most definitive texts – James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Dos Passos's *USA* – explore the complexities of modern urban life.

This close association between modernism and the city remains important to late twentieth-century conceptions of modernism, providing a key framework within which modernism continues to be explored. Both T. J. Clarke and David Harvey, for example, have examined the emergence of different conceptions of modernity in the context of Second Empire Paris. In *The Painting of Modern Life*, Clarke argues that

¹ Georg Simmel's key text is his 1900 volume *The Philosophy of Money*, David Frisby, ed., (London: Routledge, 1990). See Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, written between 1927 and 1940, was published posthumously. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999). Lewis Mumford's most prominent text is his two volume *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967). Some of Franco Moretti's most influential writings include *The Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García-Márquez* (London: Verso, 1998) and *An Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1996).

the work of Manet, Degas and Seurat attempted to give form and representation to the dilemmas of modernity and that therefore their work is embedded in the newly emerging social and economic configurations of late-nineteenth-century Paris. Harvey's *Paris: Capital of Modernity* explores the antecedents of modernism in the work of Balzac and a host of late nineteenth-century social, cultural and political thinkers. In a similar manner, Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* investigates the various proto-modernist and modernist cultural movements that flourished in late-nineteenth-century Vienna, while in *Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, John Willett explores how the work of the Berlin avant-garde was pervaded by a sense of the modern metropolis.² Malcolm Bradbury's and James McFarland's 1976 essay collection, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, states in its introduction that its intention is to challenge the typical London—Paris—New-York axis of modernism. But even this standard student text-book still constructs the study of modernism in terms of Euro-American polyglot cities and emphasises the importance of metropolitan urban experience in shaping the cultural dynamics of diverse modernist movements.³

However, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of key figures in the Anglophone cultural left began critically to re-examine this assumption, and to argue that modernism was best understood not just as a response to the social complexities and sensory peculiarities of urban life, but rather as an aesthetic revolution that needed to be explained with reference to a variety of other social phenomena including the experience of cultural immigration and exile, the

² See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981) and John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic: The New Sobriety 1917-1933* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1996).

³ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarland, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1976).

collisions between a declining *ancien-régime* or aristocratic culture in Europe and the emergence of consumer society, and the wider cultural shifts brought about within 'the West' as a consequence of the crisis of European empire.

Collectively or cumulatively, these interventions led to a reconceptualisation of not only the social geography but also the historical or temporal coordinates of modernism. The conceptual framework of modernism was widened and modernist innovations in art were no longer conceived of as a response to specifically European or advanced capitalist conditions, but to a wider complex of changes that were essentially global in scale. Crucially, modernism was viewed not just as a response to 'the shock of the new' – where 'the new' is defined in terms of European technological inventions, changing urban landscapes, or the sensory stimuli of the great Western metropolis – but to the clash between 'the modern' and 'the pre-modern' or 'non-modern' and conceived now in a broader international or transnational context. This chapter will attempt to track how this reconceptualisation of the spatial and temporal coordinates has developed within Anglophone cultural Marxism in the period between 1968 and 2002. It will document how a series of English and American Marxist theorists, primarily associated with the journal *New Left Review*, advanced a number of new hypotheses about the development of modernist art in these decades and gradually widened the terms of the debate until modernism was eventually reconfigured not as the art of the Euro-American metropolis but rather as an aesthetic movement best understood in terms of the cultural dynamics of combined and uneven development or the clash between the modern and the non-modern.

The chapter will begin by exploring the configuration of the relationship between modernism and the city with Georg Simmel's 1903 classic essay 'The

Metropolis in Modern Life'.⁴ For Simmel, the central problem facing the modern bourgeois subject is the maintenance of individual independence against the forces of society, culture and technology, which, while bringing human beings together into a single mass also threatens to overwhelm individuality. Simmel emphasises the rapid, incessant stimuli of modern culture arguing that even when art is concerned with natural landscape (as in the case of the Impressionists, for example), it is still a metropolitan phenomenon. Simmel's essay has been key to the development of a particular understanding of the relationship between the lived experience of the modern city and the modernist aesthetic sensibility.

For much of the late twentieth-century it has been conventional to describe modernism as an art of despair and pain, an art bred in the city where the scale of life diminishes the individual and where people live lives of disconnected bewilderment. This view of modernism is exemplified by the work of Malcolm Bradbury in his 1976 canonical essay 'The Cities of Modernism' (1976).⁵ Bradbury's essay will be examined here because it offers a useful overview of standard canonical assessments of modernism and in particular of modernism's association with the city, and as such it can be seen to be representative of the mode of critical thinking that several key Marxist literary critics have recently set out to challenge.

Perry Anderson, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson are four of the most significant cultural theorists in late-twentieth century Anglo-American Marxism. They have each made substantial contributions to the development of Marxist political and literary theory, and collectively they have

⁴ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, K. Peter Etkorn, trans., (London: Routledge, 1978).

⁵ Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarland, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, 96-104. Bradbury's essay is part of an anthology of modernism, of which he is one of the editors, and is designed to offer the undergraduate student an overview of modernist literature and its thematic concerns.

defined the terms of left-wing cultural debate for over four decades. Each has written a number of significant essays or monographs on modernism and it is the relationship between their various works on this topic that I want to track in this chapter. Although their various contributions to the analysis of modernism have all provoked a good deal of individual comment, the connections between their various interventions on this topic have not to date been teased out in the contemporary scholarship on modernism. What I want to show here is that the essays by Anderson, Eagleton, Williams and Jameson can be seen as part of a collective dialogue on the history and geography of modernism; that their works on modernism are best understood as an evolving series of mutually informing and interconnected responses rather than as entirely discrete or idiosyncratic commentaries on the topic. What I am concerned to explore here, in other words, are the intellectual contact points between their various discussions of modernism and to retrace the ways in which the debate on modernism unfolds via their engagements with each other over a number of decades.

The work of Perry Anderson is central to any discussion of Marxist assessments of modernism and the city since it was his 1968 essay 'Components of the National Culture' that effectively set the foundational terms of the debate.⁶ He returned to take up similar issues in the 1984 essay 'Modernity and Revolution', an essay that has proved to be the most authoritative contribution to the Marxist attempt to construct an historical materialist understanding of modernism.⁷ Anderson was also an editor of *New Left Review*, the leading Marxist English language intellectual journal of the period, where many of the issues highlighted by Eagleton, Williams,

⁶ Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 50 (July-August 1968), 48-104.

⁷ Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 144 (March-April 1984), 96-113.

and Jameson were first elaborated. 'Components of the National Culture' can also be seen as an extension of what the *New Left Review's* editorial collective termed in 1962 a 'shift towards the production of a systematic Marxist theory of British history and society'. What developed was an overview of British society that came to be known among the British left of the 1960s as the 'Nairn-Anderson thesis'.⁸ In 'Components of the National Culture', Anderson considers why twentieth-century English society had, in his view, failed to produce a radical indigenous intellectual culture. Instead, he argues, it was the 'white immigrants' who came to England from Europe and the US in the early years of the twentieth century that made the most significant contributions to modern English intellectual life.

Fellow Marxist, Terry Eagleton, took up Anderson's argument in his 1970 volume *Exiles and Émigrés*. In that work, Eagleton narrowed Anderson's focus, concentrating specifically on the lack of a significant modernist literary culture in England, and in so doing he begins to reposition the debate on modernism. Eagleton argues that modernism was not so much a product of urban writers and intellectuals, as an art form associated with exiles and *émigrés*.⁹ He redefines modernism not as an encounter by the artist with a strange new metropolitan experience, but rather as an engagement by intellectual outsiders with metropolitan cultures into which they were not fully integrated.

⁸ See 'A Decennial Report,' an unpublished *New Left Review*, report cited in Gregory Elliott, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 12, 35-52. One of the sources of the Nairn-Anderson thesis is Anderson's *New Left Review* article 'Origins of the Present Crisis'. Utilising the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Anderson argues that Britain lacks a 'totalizing' history, and that 'until our view of Britain today is grounded in some vision of its effective past, however misconceived and transient this may be, we will continue to lack the basis for an understanding of the contradictory movements of our society, which alone could yield a strategy for socialism'. See Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 25 (January/February, 1964), 16. For further discussion of the Nairn-Anderson thesis, see Elliott, *Perry Anderson*, 12-14.

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970).

The debate concerning the nature and character of modernism intensified in the 1980s. This would prove to be a troubling decade for Marxism in general. Politically, socialism was in decline in Europe and North America. The political failures of the 1960s cost the movement many of its supporters and the rise of neo-liberalism in Britain and America created a new social and intellectual landscape. The intellectual climate of the left began to be dominated by discussions of postmodernism, and it was in this context that the debate about modernism, modernity and the city began to shift again. In his 1982 volume *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, the American Marxist Marshall Berman argued for a return to the modernist spirit of the recent past as a way to revitalise and transform the present.¹⁰ Anderson intervened in the debate again with a response to Berman published in 1984 in *New Left Review* titled 'Modernity and Revolution'. In this essay, Anderson periodises modernism, arguing that it is not simply, as Eagleton had argued, a cultural creation of outsiders and exiles; rather, it is a product of an international force-field triangulated by three coordinates that together created conditions of uneven development within which varieties of artistic innovations could explode.

The work of Raymond Williams takes Anderson's thesis in new directions by introducing the topic of empire to the larger debate.¹¹ In 'The New Metropolis', Williams's discussion of modernism transcends national frameworks and focuses on the effects of the system of imperialism within Europe, arguing that while the presence of empire is not always obvious in the content of modernist writing, its effects can often be detected at the level of form. Secondly, in an 1987 essay 'When

¹⁰ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

¹¹ Raymond Williams, 'Metropolitan Conceptions and the Emergence of Modernism' in Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), 37-47.

was Modernism?', Williams challenges the accepted periodisation of modernism.¹² He argues that the body of writing generally labelled 'modernism' tends to ignore the significant contributions made by nineteenth-century realist writers. In other words, Williams argues that what we refer to objectively as modernism is in fact a highly selective version of the art of the period, one that ignores the historical context of production.

This chapter we will allow us to see how a number of key figures in Anglophone Marxism challenged the traditional history and geography of modernism. Modernism, they argued, could no longer be understood solely as a response to the stimuli and alienation of the metropolitan city; rather, it must be reconceived as a product of global uneven development. Modernism thus becomes reconfigured in terms of a clash between the modern and the non-modern and between the European and the non-European.

1.2 Modernism and the City

Standard accounts of modernism have tended to argue that the movement finds its origins and natural habitat in cities – in particular, metropolitan polyglot cities – that for various historical reasons would later become cosmopolitan centres of intellectual and cultural exchange.¹³ These cultural capitals were frequently, but not always, national political capitals that attracted both native artists and artistic travellers and exiles. 'In these cities', Malcolm Bradbury writes in 'The Cities of Modernism', 'with their cafés and cabarets, magazines, publishers, and galleries, the

¹² Raymond Williams, 'When was Modernism?', in Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*.

¹³ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 96.

new aesthetics were distilled; generations argued, and movements contested' and 'the new causes and forms became matters of struggle and campaigns.'¹⁴

The close association in art and literature between the city and the experience of being modern is not unique to modernism; it is also intrinsic to much of the literature of the nineteenth century. The great city functions as a centre of competition and invention. It disseminates images of the modernisation process through newspapers, magazines and books, but if it is a place of excitement and energy, it also threatens its inhabitants, who feel anonymous within its teeming mass and cut off from face-to-face relationships which were supposed to be typical of the smaller 'organic' societies from which so many had migrated in the early decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Since the mid-nineteenth century, the modern metropolis has been taken to be crucial to the study of modernity.¹⁶ This may be due, in part, to the fact that, as Carl Schorske contends, the city is the social entity most visibly affected by the processes of change and, therefore, it has become a key site for critical reflection on the conditions and prospects of modernisation.¹⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, the expansion of the constructed urban and industrial world became ever more visible and began to displace the countryside as a source of

¹⁴ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 96, 97.

¹⁵ Between 1800 and 1900, the number of European urban dwellers tripled due to migration rather than to an increase in the birth-rate. London grew from 4,770,000 to 7,256,000 inhabitants in this period; Paris from 2,269,000 to 2,888,000 and Berlin from 1,122,000 to 2,071,000. See Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁶ It is, however, important to note that the concept of modernity was never simply defined or elaborated in terms of the development of the modern city or in terms of the rural-urban divide. For some theorists, such as Karl Marx, the capitalist mode of production was paramount. For Émile Durkheim, the nature of social solidarity in modern society was of primary importance, while for Max Weber, the historical investigation of the origins of modern western rationalism and its derivative, rational-capitalism, were overriding. For further analysis, see Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁷ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 6.

available refuge and inspiration for aesthetic revelation.¹⁸ This was a period of explosive urban growth, strong rural-to-urban migration, industrialisation, mechanisation, massive reorderings of built environments. It also witnessed the emergence of politically-based urban movements, of which the revolutionary uprisings in Paris in 1848 and 1871 were examples. The pressing need to confront the psychological, sociological, technical, organisational and political problems of massive urbanisation was one of the things that stimulated the modernist movements in architecture and the arts. It was not simply that nature diminished in importance as a subject of art and literature; rather, the ‘humanisation’ of nature through technology and the modern city allowed for art to be viewed as a subject in its own right. In the work of ‘modernist’ writers such as Charles Baudelaire, art began to be understood as a self-reflexive construction and not as an expression of emotion or as a representation of outer or inner reality.¹⁹

For literary intellectuals at least, Baudelaire provided the classic description of the peculiar psychology of the city-dweller in his essay ‘The Heroism of Modern Life’ (1846). Baudelaire scorns the heroism of a public, political life in favour of the pleasures of the bohemian underworld.²⁰ The city’s modernity is defined for him by the activities of the *flâneur* observer, whose aim is to derive ‘the eternal from the transitory’ and to see ‘the poetic in the historic’.²¹ Modernity, for Baudelaire, is a matter of theme not form, and it is the sheer evanescence of the city experience

¹⁸ For further contrasts between modernism and romanticism, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

¹⁹ See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Brecht, Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). See especially Chapter Two, 38-42.

²⁰ Schorske contends that any investigation of the intellectual’s idea of the city inevitably leads outside of its own frame into myriad concepts and values about the nature of human beings, society and culture. See Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 37.

²¹ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Heroism of Modern Life’, cited in Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 133.

which challenges the contemporary artist: 'Modernity consists in the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent – and makes half of art, of which the other part is eternal and immutable'.²²

In Georg Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis in Modern Life' (1903), the detached and aristocratic *flâneur* gives way to the city newcomer, suddenly subjected to a disorientating 'intensification of nervous stimulation', so that 'with each crossing of the street . . . the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life' and its 'deeply felt and emotional relationships'.²³ The way in which Simmel thinks about urban experience is qualitatively different to what we find in nineteenth-century urban writing. Writers like Dickens and Zola had tended to stress in their work the inter-relationship between different social groups in the city, so that the sense of urban community still retained some of the 'organic' quality associated with the pre-modern village. However, the modernist sensibility was concerned more with the isolated and self-divided psychology of the detached individual. Simmel emphasises the subjective experience of the city, an emphasis also central to the concerns of philosophers, poets, writers and painters in the early twentieth century. He argues that the rural dweller has 'a steadier rhythm of uninterrupted habituations' which is 'rooted in the more unconscious levels of the psyche', whereas 'Metropolitan man' has to develop a 'protective organ of intellect' to deal with the newness of his experience and its more accelerated rhythms.²⁴

According to Simmel, the lonely depersonalisation of metropolitan society provokes a new defensive intellectualism, which the modern individual now requires

²² Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', cited in Butler, *Early Modernism*, 134.

²³ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, 118.

²⁴ See Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe*, Chapter 4. Butler has argued that an inability to create 'explanatory casual patterns' from 'the habitual' results in the representation of urban experience by montage techniques (34).

in order to sustain an interior life of introspection against the overwhelming and machine-like activities of city life. The modern city creates a particular kind of experience involving 'the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli'. He argues that the unceasing flood of new impressions to which citizens of the great metropolis are subjected encourages them to adopt a dissociated 'blasé attitude', the refusal to register any further changes, while the era of anonymity, of being reduced to a cipher, encourages both a 'sensitivity to differences' and the adoption of 'the most tendentious peculiarities, that is the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice and preciousness'.²⁵ Bearing out Simmel's arguments, we can see that the great modernist writers were no longer happy to present the city in 'natural' or 'organic' terms; they presented it rather as a place of entrapment and confusion. It is the refusal of the aestheticising image that is shocking in a poet such as T. S. Eliot. Thus, John McCormack argues that Eliot associates the city with 'our special modern dreck, with banal and contemptible people, [and] with hasty and vividly unpleasant sex.' For McCormack, Eliot differs from nineteenth-century poets because 'he does not oppose the city to the ample bosom of nature', and 'in his inability to do so, lies his modernness and his despair.'²⁶

The characteristic devices of modernism – montage, self-reflexiveness, interior monologue, paradox, 'the assault on the subject' – all have their roots in the 'common' experience of the early twentieth century. As Simmel has argued, the sensory bombardment of the city-dweller leads to a set of interrelated reactions: a heightened sensitivity to differences, to modulations of tone and inflection, that leads to an emphasis on style, on caprice and cultivated mannerisms; sensory fatigue also

²⁵ Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', 187.

²⁶ John McCormack, *American Literature 1919-1932* (New Jersey: Transaction, 2000), 130.

manifests itself as a *blasé* attitude to the external world, to neurasthenia, and to a withdrawal into subjectivity and into the world of the dissociated 'inner man'.²⁷ In one of the seminal documents of modernism, the futurist composer Luigi Russolo argues that modern music incorporates the sounds of the machine and the city:

Ancient life was all silence. In the nineteenth century, with the invention of the machine, noise was born. Today, noise triumphs and reigns supreme over the sensibilities of men . . . At first, the art of noise sought and achieved limpidity, purity and sweetness of sound . . . Today, music strives to amalgamate the most dissonant, strange and harsh sounds. In this way we come ever closer to noise-sound. This evolution towards noise-sound was not possible before now. The ear of the eighteenth-century man could never have endured the discordant intensity of certain chords produced by orchestras . . . To our ears, on the other hand, they sound pleasant, since our hearing has already been educated by modern life . . . Musical sound is too limited in its qualitative variety of tones. The most complex orchestras boil down to four or five types of instrument . . . and so modern music goes around in this small circle . . . The limited circle of pure sounds must be broken and the infinite variety of 'noise sound' conquered.²⁸

For Russolo, the history of music in the twentieth century is the history of the breakdown of the tonal system and the introduction of dissonance.

If the ear is affected in this way by the sensory overload of modernity and the city, then so too is the eye. The eye is subject to a never-ending stream of half-glimpsed images coming from near and far, which the individual is often incapable of assimilating. The emergence of montage in the visual arts reflects this. The montage effect is not simply imposed arbitrarily by the artist, but reflects the way that reality itself is experienced: the manner in which the subject is bombarded by

²⁷ Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', 187-8.

²⁸ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (New York: Pendragon, 1986). See also the notes on Russolo in Umbro Appolonio ed., *The Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971). Russolo constructed a series of 'noise-machines' (*intonarumori*) in which he preformed his 'noise spirals' such as 'The Awakening of a Great City' and 'A Meeting of Cars and Aeroplanes'.

uncoordinated or random stimuli. And just as the subject struggles to discern order in this chaos, the intelligent artist uses montage not to disorientate but to make new connections in experience. This is also true of montage when it is used as a literary device; Dos Passos's *USA* and Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Life of the Automobile* both juxtapose different types of materials in order to construct an image of the whole. It is only in certain cases, such as Dadaism or the nonsense poems of Tristan Tzara, that modernist fragmentation submits to the drive towards totalisation or succumbs entirely to chaos.²⁹

Though cities have been an important source of patronage for the arts throughout history, the relationship between artists and the city has also been highly ambiguous. In many literary works, the city is celebrated as a place of excitement and cultural refinement, as a desired destination from whence one could escape the tedium and provincialism of rural life.³⁰ But writers and intellectuals have also long detested the city, and one of art's most enduring genres, the pastoral, has at its heart a desire to escape and/or transcend urban living.³¹ However, the temptation to locate the true artistic spirit as existing in the world of nature may have more to do with the cultural legacy of romanticism than with any natural affinity between the artist and the natural world. Yet artists and intellectuals have constantly gone to the city to find the worlds of art and experience and the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the

²⁹ Seth Taylor, *Left-Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism 1919-1920* (New York/ Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 181.

³⁰ See Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (Cambridge, Mass: New Press, 1976), 18.

³¹ Michael Dear has argued that in his early work Baudelaire depicts a pastoral vision of modernity, rejoicing in modern life as 'a fashion' or 'a carnival'. In his later writing, Baudelaire constructs a counterpastoral vision 'pouring scorn' on the idea of progress and modern life. Dear argues that Baudelaire is here suggesting that the concept of indefinite progress 'is the cruellest and most ingenious torture ever invented'. See Michael Dear, 'In the City Time Becomes Visible: Intentionality and Urbanism in Los Angeles, 1781-1991' in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, eds., *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 82.

city has been a constant source of artistic material, so much so that the city in literature is more metaphor than place. Therefore, if modernism is a particularly metropolitan art, that is because, at least in part, the modern artist has become immersed in the spirit of the modern city, which is itself an exemplary site of a modern technological society.

Malcolm Bradbury's widely cited essay 'Modernism and the City' exemplifies how the relationship between modernism and the city has been conceived for much of the late twentieth century. Bradbury does construct a convincing argument in regard to the extent to which much of modernist writing encapsulates modern urban experience. He argues that the modern city has 'appropriated most of the functions and communications of society, most of its populations, and the farthest extremities of its technological, commercial, industrial and intellectual experience. The city has become culture, or perhaps the chaos that succeeds it.'³² The city-novel and the city poems are, Bradbury argues, two of modernism's most dominant forms. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and the poetry of Mayakovsky are some major instances. What is important in these works, he argues, is 'their pervasive assumption about the compelling urban nature of the landscape in which we live', where the city becomes 'a system of life constructed on a wholly new principle'.³³

Secondly, and more importantly in relation to this chapter, many of the artists that emerged as key figures within modernism found themselves, through emigration and/or exile, at a distance from local origins, class allegiances, and the specific

³² Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 97.

³³ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 100.

obligations and responsibilities of those rooted in organic communities and cultures. These artists often cut themselves off, like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) from all ties with family, race and religion in order to develop 'the uncreated conscience of [their] race'.³⁴ This deracinated condition, Bradbury suggests, helps to explain why the modernists were so invested in aesthetic experience and why they displayed such an obsessive concern with style and form. Therefore, while one overall theme of modernism may be dislocation and loss, the other is artistic emancipation. For Bradbury, modernism in this sense can be seen to possess its own unique geography that is characterised more by its constant fluctuation than by any simple conception of core and periphery. Bradbury writes:

For modernism is a metropolitan art, which is to say that it is a group art, a specialist art, an intellectual art, an art for one's aesthetic peers; it recalls, with whatever ironies and paradoxes, the imperium of civilization. Not simply metropolitan, but cosmopolitan: one city leads to another in the distinctive aesthetic voyage into the metamorphosis of form.³⁵

In Bradbury's view, if modernism has a core, geographically it is Paris, but modernism was never reducible to one city; it was the distillation of many capitals and many different intellectual, national and aesthetic styles. Secondly, he argues that an artist's life is essentially, both internally and externally, nomadic: 'The writer himself becomes a member of a wandering, culturally inquisitive group – by enforced exile . . . or by design and desire. The place of art's very making can become an ideal distant city, where the creator counts, or the chaos is fruitful, the *Weltgeist* flows'.³⁶ In other words, for Bradbury the association of modernism with

³⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Paladin, 1988), 257.

³⁵ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 101.

³⁶ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 101.

writers who are either exiles or emigrants is not a material situation, it is an ontological condition of being a writer.

Though the Marxist literary critics that we will examine later will dispute Bradbury's thesis that modernism is quintessentially the art of the city, that thesis remains convincing in some fundamental ways at least. Firstly, when we think of modernism, we cannot but be reminded of the great European and American urban centres that are associated with it. Paris's long-standing reputation as a hub for European culture saw it attract many innovators and it became the site where many key modernist developments emerged, particularly between 1905 and 1914. Berlin, Vienna and Prague were the centres of Germanic modernism from the late 1890s until the early 1920s. Moscow and St. Petersburg were key locations for the Symbolist phase of modernism in the years before the 1917 Revolution. London has an ambiguous relationship with modernism, but it nevertheless sustained and developed a vital sequence of experimental movements between 1890 and 1920. New York and Chicago were the major locations of American modernism. Secondly, these cities were also focal points for intellectual communities, sites of intellectual conflict, environments that carried within themselves the contradictions and complexities of modernity. Thirdly, it is within the city that the essential infrastructures of the arts are located: bookshops, publishers, libraries, museums, galleries, theatres, universities and national academies. However, as Bradbury himself acknowledges towards the end of his essay, the geography of modernist literature may be more complicated than he allows for. He concedes that the experience of 'emigration or exile' has been central to modernist writers such as James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, W.H. Auden, and Vladimir Nabokov. Here, Bradbury appears to be implicitly acknowledging

Eagleton's earlier *Exiles and Émigrés* (1970). However, unlike Eagleton, he fails to provide an adequate theory that would explain the key role played by émigrés in the development of modernism. For him, modernism was an international urban movement, associated with no one city in particular and therefore 'depended considerably . . . on the readiness of writers to continue the journey to the city they had begun through many cities'.³⁷

Bradbury's thesis assumes that modernism was always transnational, but he seems to think that transnational is a given of artistic life, not something that has to be accounted for. Thus, he both highlights and explains away the cosmopolitan and exilic dimension of modernism by simply asserting its association with the city and arguing that modernism is an international movement because its writers and artists 'maintained contact and radiated influence'.³⁸ He makes no attempt to explain why its most innovative and artistically successful practitioners were émigrés, only remarking on their status. Bradbury's essay is representative of an argument that conceives of modernism as a product of advanced capitalist metropolitan life. It is this assumption that began to be challenged, from the late 1960s onwards, by a number of key Marxist intellectuals around the coterie of *New Left Review*. These critics – Perry Anderson, Terry Eagleton, and Raymond Williams – shifted the terms of the debate and argued that it was more accurate to conceive of modernism in terms of migrancy, the contradictory and uneven development of industrial capitalism, and the presence of Empire.

³⁷ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 102.

³⁸ Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism', 102.

1.3 Modernism: A Culture of Exiles and Émigrés

In the 1960s a new generation of Marxist literary and cultural critics began to re-evaluate and to challenge the idea that the set of artistic innovations known as modernism were to be exclusively identified with the transatlantic axis of London – Paris – New York. In 1968, Perry Anderson's essay, 'Components of the National Culture', had argued that an 'absent centre' can be located at the centre of British culture in the twentieth century.³⁹ This absence is marked and characterised by the lack of a classical sociology – a '*synthetic* social science . . . aspir[ing] to a global reconstruction of social formations – and the absence of an "indigenous" Marxism'.⁴⁰ Consequently, there had been no synthesis in the various disciplines of the first half of the twentieth century to capture the 'social totality' of Britain.⁴¹ Instead, he concludes, the void at the centre of British culture produced a 'pseudo centre' that haunted intellectual life, obstructing change and self-examination.⁴² Anderson highlights the influx into England, from 1900 onwards, of 'white immigration'. Many of these immigrants were, he argues, intellectuals, like Lewis Namier, Karl Popper, Melanie Klein and Isaiah Berlin, who were 'fleeing the permanent instability of their own societies' and were attracted to England because it epitomised 'tradition, continuity and orderly empire'. As a result, Anderson argues, it was these émigrés who influenced crucial cultural formations, and they 'powerfully flattered and enlarged' the 'convex mirror they presented' English society. For Anderson, these

³⁹ Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', 3-57. This article appeared in the fiftieth issue of the *New Left Review* in the Summer of 1968 under the banner headline 'Combat Bourgeois Ideas', pointing to what Gregory Elliott termed the 'intimate connection between Anderson's bombardment of the ideological headquarters of the bourgeoisie and student rebellion'. See Elliott, *Perry Anderson*, 46-53.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', 8, 12. [Anderson's emphasis]

⁴¹ Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', 12.

⁴² Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', 56.

immigrant intellectuals ‘*both* reinforced the existing orthodoxy *and* exploited its weakness’⁴³:

[T]he unmistakable fact is that the traditional, discrete disciplines, having missed either of the great synthetic revolutions in European social thought, were dying of inanition. The English intelligentsia had lost its impetus. Already by the turn of the century, the expatriate supremacy of James and Conrad, Eliot and Pound – three Americans and a Pole – in the two great national literary forms foreshadowed later and more dramatic disposessions. The last great producers of the English intelligentsia matured before the First World War: Russell, Keynes and Lawrence. Their stature is the measure of the subsequent decline. After them, confidence and originality seeped away. There was no more momentum left in the culture; the cumulative absence of any new historical experience in England for so long had deprived it of energy. The conquest of social dominance by emigres, in these conditions, becomes explicable.⁴⁴

These émigrés for the first time ‘systemized the refusal of the system’, thus codifying a national culture that has as its locus a pseudo centre.

Following Anderson’s lead, Terry Eagleton published a text in 1970, *Exiles and Émigrés*, which takes Anderson’s thesis about British culture generally, and applies it specifically to literature.⁴⁵ His opening sentence in the introduction reads:

If it is agreed that the seven most significant writers of twentieth-century English literature have been a Pole, three Americans, two Irishmen and an Englishman, then it might also be agreed that the paradox is odd enough to be studied.⁴⁶

Eagleton’s thesis is that the exiled or émigré status of these six writers – Joseph Conrad, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce – was

⁴³ Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, 18. [Anderson’s emphasis]

⁴⁴ Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, 19.

⁴⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970).

⁴⁶ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 9.

to be a defining factor in their work.⁴⁷ They all appeared to have felt compelled to write about the collapse and disintegration of Western civilisation and in so doing they were able to utilise experiences and perspectives outside English society. Eagleton's study is, therefore, in part, an attempt to answer the question: 'Why . . . should it be that, at the heart of this felt disintegration [of English society], the great art of English literature should have been the work of foreigners and émigrés?'⁴⁸

Exiles and Émigrés develops and extends the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács's work on nineteenth-century realism, utilising the key Lukácsian terms of 'totality' and 'totalisation'. Lukács used these terms to describe the ability of literary works to embody a complete vision of society by creating a connection between the public and private spheres of human existence. For Eagleton, nineteenth-century writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens and George Eliot were 'able to fuse the profoundest inwardness and the specific life of their own times with a capacity to generalise that life into the form of a complete vision'.⁴⁹ Eagleton modifies the Lukácsian view of social realism and argues that the process of grasping any culture as a whole becomes much more problematic in fiction from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and is decisively ruptured in the early twentieth century. In a world where human beings experience their conditions in life as fragmentary and flawed, the writer must struggle to find a vantage point from which a coherent view is

⁴⁷ Eagleton does not include Beckett in this list. One possible explanation is that Beckett is, at this point, generally perceived as a French writer and not an Irish writer. As we will see later in Chapter Five this perception will be challenged in the 1980s and 1990s by the work of key Irish critics, such as Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd. These critics will have an important influence on Eagleton's later work.

⁴⁸ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 15. The one exception, Eagleton argues, is Lawrence, who while notionally part of English literary culture was an outsider in that he was working class. Both upper-class English authors, such as Forster, Woolf and Waugh, and lower middle-class authors such as Gissing, Shaw, Bennett and Wells, lacked the ability to totalise and transcend that the great English writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens and George Eliot had. The ideology of the native authors was, he contends, limited to Bloomsbury liberalism or Fabianism.

⁴⁹ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 34.

possible. This difficulty was particularly felt by indigenous English writers, who found themselves caught within 'partial and one-sided attachments and unable to "totalize" the significant movements of their own culture'.⁵⁰ Lukács had viewed modernism as a 'wrong turn', which rather than interrogating the chaos and inhumanity of capitalist society, simply succumbs to it and tries to give it literary or artistic expression. He ascribes the limitations of individual modernists to their 'bourgeois' attachments and not to the fact that they conform to new fashions or lack a strong socialist sensibility. Eagleton, by contrast, attributes the inability of modernist writers to totalise, and the consequent development of a modernist aesthetics of fragmentation, not to the bourgeois attachments of modernist writers but to a cultural shift brought about by major historical transformations.

In *Exiles and Émigrés*, Eagleton argues that the years of the First World War constitute a period when the very nature of English civilisation was called into serious question, resulting in a sense of 'exhaustion, futility and disintegration' that sapped the very core of English society. The work of writers like Huxley and Waugh responded to this social crisis with a sense of disgusted futility and cynicism, these responses being an indicator, rather than a creative diagnosis, of disturbance. Eagleton, however argues that exilic modernists such as Eliot, Joyce, Pound and Yeats, as well as the working-class Lawrence, had immediate access to alternative cultures and traditions and different frameworks against which, in a highly creative tension, the erosion of the contemporary order could be located and conceived.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 34.

⁵¹ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 15.

These writers could approach English indigenous traditions from the outside, objectify and appropriate them for their own purposes.⁵²

Eagleton's argument was an important contribution to theoretical discussions about the relationship between modernism and the city and went some way towards explaining some of the difficulties with the standard thesis. *Exiles and Émigrés* provides a convincing argument as to why England, as the most advanced metropolitan culture of the early twentieth century, was unable to produce any significant modernist movements.⁵³ He argues that twentieth-century upper- and middle-class English authors lacked the ability to totalise and transcend their society. Their class position limited their ideology to Bloomsbury liberalism or Fabianism. Émigré authors, on the other hand, totalised and transcended society through myth. Myth is usually thought to have its roots in pre-industrial societies, while modernism is conventionally located within the world of late-capitalism. Eagleton argues that 'modernism ... is the crisis of bourgeois culture induced by [the] traumatic transition' from feudalism to capitalism.⁵⁴ Émigré writers, because of their outside and detached status, were better able to utilise myth as a totalising force because they could understand the world from a more extended historical and social perspective.

While Eagleton's *Exiles and Émigrés* adds an important dimension to a materialist understanding of the origins of modernism, it does possess one key

⁵² Eagleton develops this argument further in the 1987 essay 'The End of English', *Textual Practice* Vol. 1, No. 1, (1987), 1-9. He argues that exiled and emigrant writers such as James, Conrad, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett were able 'to view English lineages less as a heritage to be protected' and more as 'an object to be problematised'. Writers such as Joyce and Eliot can 'ramble across the whole span of European literature, shameless *bricoleurs* liberated from the Oedipal constraints of a motherland' ('The End of English', 1). This essay will be examined in more detail in the next chapter on Modernism and Imperialism. See also Sean Golden, 'Post-Traditional English Literature: A Polemic', in M. Hederman and R. Kearney, eds. *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1982), 429-30.

⁵³ Eagleton's argument in *Exiles and Émigrés* could not, for example, be easily translated to Germany or France.

⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton, 'Modernism, Myth and Monopoly Capitalism' in Stephen Regan ed., *The Eagleton Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 281.

weakness. *Exiles and Émigrés* is stronger on how the exilic writer makes good deficiencies within English culture than it is on what they bring from their indigenous cultures. Eagleton's exclusively national focus is prohibitive and one-dimensional. Moreover, there is a surprising unwillingness on his part to address the effects of colonialism on the concept of exile itself. Taking his cue from Anderson's 'Components of the National Culture', Eagleton attributes the absence of a significant English component of modernism to 'certain central flaws and impoverishments' in English culture.⁵⁵ Émigré writers such as Conrad and James were able to 'bring to bear on the culture a range of experiences – of America, Europe, the East . . . It was out of this tension that James and Conrad created their major work and it was a tension notably absent in the work of their contemporaries'.⁵⁶ Eagleton essentially finds in James and Conrad a vital contact with the colonial world. However, this is only a partial and ultimately inadequate response to the presence of empire within modernism. As Timothy Brennan has argued, Eagleton simply 'combats English insularity by binding it more closely to European insularity'. He fails to acknowledge the 'thinking of colonial subjects' and sees the colonial only as noteworthy for what it offers English culture.⁵⁷ Despite its strong relevance to the book's theme, Eagleton fails to include the perspective of the colonial subject and we are left with the impression that the presence of empire is relevant to modernism only in terms of the thematic dimension it can provide the metropolitan writer. Eagleton would at a later stage address the presence of empire in modernism, particularly in relation to Ireland, and this later work is informed by an

⁵⁵ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 16.

⁵⁶ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 17.

⁵⁷ Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form', in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 62.

important essay by Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', which is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

1.4 Marshall Berman and Perry Anderson

The argument about the relationship between modernism and the city was further transformed by Perry Anderson's seminal 1984 essay 'Modernity and Revolution'.⁵⁸ The essay set in motion one of the key debates on the relationship between Marxism and modernism in the second half of the twentieth century. It was conceived initially as a response to Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, so before examining the points of disagreement between Berman and Anderson, it is useful to begin by looking at some of the key arguments developed by Berman's study.⁵⁹

All That is Solid Melts Into Air is a study in the dialectics of modernisation and modernism. Before offering a definition of these two key terms, Berman begins by identifying what he means by modernity. One of strengths of Berman's work is his ability, through the sheer force of his writing, to convey the dialectical nature of the experience of modernity, the simultaneous sense of terror and exhilaration that lies at the heart of the modern urban experience:

There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today . . . To be modern is to find oneself

⁵⁸ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', *New Left Review* Vol. 1, No. 144, (March/April 1984), 96-113; reprinted as 'Marshall Berman: Modernity and Revolution' in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1995), 25-45, together with a postscript from 1985 (46-55). It was originally presented to a colloquium on postmodernism in Spain. It is reprinted, with the post-paper discussion in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 334-38. [All citations from this edition unless otherwise stated.]

⁵⁹ Berman is a New York-based academic, with no significant links to the organised left, although he participated in the student movements of 1968. His book-length study on the relationship between Marxism and modernity, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, was the product of more than ten years research and was published in 1983 to much acclaim. While he published a collection of essays, written over the past fifteen years, in 1999, *Adventures in Marxism* (London: Verso, 1999), *All That is Solid Melts into Air* remains his most significant publication to date.

in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind.⁶⁰

However, Berman argues that any sense of unity created by this experience is paradoxical, what he terms ‘a unity of disunity’, that creates ‘a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal’. Berman’s thesis echoes the famous paragraph by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* and he concludes by quoting Marx and declaring modernity to be an experience in which ‘all that is solid melts into air’.⁶¹ Berman argues that while many have experienced modernity as a radical danger to history and tradition, it has developed its own sense of the past, its own history and tradition in the course of the previous five centuries. He declares in his introduction to *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* that his subject is that history, the history of modernity.

This ‘maelstrom’ of modernity, that is both exhilarating and terrifying, that exists in ‘a perpetual state of becoming’, is initiated by a series of social and world-historical processes that Berman refers to as ‘modernization’.⁶² This process of modernisation has created a wide ensemble of visions, ideas and values ‘that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give

⁶⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 15.

⁶¹ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 15. Marx’s and Engel’s famous paragraph from *The Communist Manifesto* reads: ‘The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.’ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1967), 83.

⁶² Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 16.

them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own'.⁶³ In the course of the twentieth century these 'visions and values' have come to be loosely associated under the term modernism. In other words, for Berman, modernisation represents the social changes that are constantly taking place in this respect; modernity is the way in which these changes are immediately lived and experienced, whether consciously or not, and modernism is the post-facto reflection, the intellectual and artistic representation of these changes. Since he is an admirer of modernism in its nineteenth and early twentieth century phases, he recommends that:

It may turn out, then, that going back can be a way to go forward: that remembering the modernisms of the nineteenth century can give us the vision and courage to create the modernisms of the twenty-first. This act of remembering can help us bring modernism back to its roots, so that it can nourish and renew itself, to confront the adventures and dangers that lie ahead. To appropriate the modernities of yesterday can be at once a critique of the modernities of today and an act of faith in the modernities—and in the modern men and women—of tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow.⁶⁴

Modernity, Berman argues, is the key middle term between the 'dialectics of modernization and modernism'.⁶⁵ Modernity is not simply an economic system or a cultural revelation; rather, it is an historical event that mediates the relationship between the two through a process of development. It is this concept of development, Perry Anderson has argued, that is the central dynamic of the book and the premise for most of its paradoxes.⁶⁶ According to Anderson, development means two different things for Berman. Firstly, it refers primarily, but not exclusively, to economic development, to the enormous changes unleashed by the expansion of

⁶³ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 16

⁶⁴ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 36.

⁶⁵ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 16

⁶⁶ See Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 340ff.

capitalism. Secondly, it refers to the enormous subjective transformations of individual life and personality which occur with the development of capitalism. Capitalist development is, therefore, for Berman, a dialectical experience, being at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to humanity and the worst. It is the combination of these two competing notions of development that creates a dramatic tension within individuals living within modernity.⁶⁷ For Berman, the works of Goethe and Marx offer a key to understanding the spirit of modernity and he therefore begins his study by offering a detailed examination of *Faust* and *The Communist Manifesto*. He then proceeds to examine the literary representations of urban transformation as found in the work of Baudelaire, Pushkin, Gogol, Chernyshevsky, Biely, and Mandelstam vis-à-vis their classic works written in or on Paris and St. Petersburg. He concludes his study by examining the engineering career of Robert Moses and its destructive effects on New York City, ending with a series of comments on contemporary urban blight and cultural renewal.

Berman subdivides modernity into three phases. In the first phase, which moves approximately from the start of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, people are just beginning to experience modern life and find themselves overwhelmed by the experience. The second phase begins with the great revolutionary wave of the 1790s. With the French Revolution and its reverberations, a great modern public, abruptly and dramatically, comes to life. In the twentieth century, his third and final phase, the process of modernisation expands to take in virtually the entire world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieves spectacular triumphs in art and thought.

⁶⁷ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 318.

While Berman gives the impression of having created a very precise periodisation, Anderson has highlighted a number of difficulties, even at this early stage. For example, given that his study is concentrated on an examination of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one would expect the demarcations between these two phases to be more clearly evident. Yet no distinction is convincingly established. While his initial delimitation of the broad outlines and origins of the second phase are more or less clear, this phase starts as an era of social revolutions and tensions caused by the decline but stubborn persistence of the *ancien régime* and the fragile and uncertain emergence of capitalist political power and social transformation. But Berman gives no indication as to when or why he considers this second period to end or when his third and final phase begins. As Anderson has shown, the reader is left with a number of key questions that Berman fails to answer: does the second phase end with the second wave of industrialisation, coupled with colonial expansion and the socio-cultural explosion of the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Or does the second phase end with the coming of the First World War? Or does it end with the Great Depression and the rise of the welfare/corporate states during the 1930s? This is a serious difficulty, particularly when considered in light of the current controversy over the periodisation of modernity and postmodernity.⁶⁸

Berman's periodisation here is an attempt to debunk the postmodern theorists and their theorisation of postmodernism by providing what he considers a more solid and alternative viewpoint. In order to do so, Berman would have to identify the twentieth-century conjuncture or articulation of conjunctures that clearly distinguished the second phase of modernity from the third. In that way he would have been able to make a case for modernity as a never-ending [sixteenth to

⁶⁸ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 321-22.

twentieth-century] story that still continues into the present, yet, he fails to do this. Therefore, Anderson argues, contrary to the initial appearance of having a clear grasp of the demarcations that establish the coordinates of an historical process, Berman, in the final analysis, conceives of modernity as 'a linear process of constant change, of prolongation and extension that keeps on reproducing itself'. His conception of modernisation as the social process that brings this 'maelstrom' into being and keeps it in a state of perpetual becoming is what determines this linear perspective.⁶⁹ The difficulty with this argument is that modernisation becomes a loosely-unified transhistorical abstraction rather than something that can be explained in historical materialist terms.

In 'Modernity and Revolution', Anderson contends that modernism cannot be defined as a unified set of artistic practices.⁷⁰ He establishes a contrast between the ultimately ahistorical view of modernisation and the need to establish a clear periodisation:

[T]he idea of modernization [developed in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*] involves a conception of fundamentally *planar* development – a continuous-flow process in which there is no real differentiation of one conjuncture of epoch from another, save in terms of the mere chronological succession of old and new, earlier and late, categories themselves subject to unceasing permutation of positions in one direction as times goes by and the later becomes earlier, the newer older. Such is, of course, an accurate account of the temporality of the market and of the commodities that circulate across it . . . In other words, the history of capitalism must be *periodized*, and its determinate *trajectory* reconstructed, if we are to have any sober understanding of what capitalist

⁶⁹ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 15-16.

⁷⁰ Franco Moretti expresses similar reservations about the category of modernism but is rather more concrete in the way that he expresses his scepticism: 'I just cannot think of a meaningful category that could include, say surrealism, *Ulysses*, and something by Brecht. I can't think what the common attributes of such a concept could be. The objects are too dissimilar.' Franco Moretti, 'The Spell of Indecision' (discussion) in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 346.

development actually means. The concept of modernization occludes the very possibility of that.⁷¹

Anderson then goes on to argue that Berman's approach even makes difficult a precise understanding of the different cultural changes that took place within the modern period by confusing the analysis of nineteenth-century 'modernism' with its early twentieth-century analogues:

[M]odernism, as a specific set of aesthetic forms, is generally dated precisely *from* the twentieth century, is indeed typically construed by way of contrast with realist and other classical forms of the nineteenth, eighteenth or earlier centuries. Virtually all of the actual literary texts analysed so well by Berman – whether Goethe, Baudelaire, Puskin or Dostoesvky – precede modernism proper in the usual sense of the word (the only exceptions, are the fictions of Beily and Mandelstam, which precisely are twentieth-century artefacts). In other words, by more conventional criteria modernism too needs to be framed within some more differential conception of historical time.⁷²

Berman also confuses and makes difficult the analysis of the socio-cultural changes that took place during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. His account of the period is unable, within its own terms of reference, to offer an alternative to the dichotomy it bemoans, whether between art and thought, or between the practice and theory of modernity in the twentieth century. His book seeks to reverse the intellectual decline that has occurred by returning to what he understands as the classical spirit of modernity that informs both art and thought. But, as Anderson argues, 'that decline remains unintelligible within his schema once modernization is itself conceived as a linear process of prolongation and expansion, which necessarily carries with it a constant renewal of the sources of modern art'.⁷³ In the context of the socio-cultural and historical impasse of the present, the only solution that Berman appears to offer

⁷¹ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 321-22. [Anderson's emphasis]

⁷² Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 322-23.

⁷³ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 323.

is to return to the future: 'In this bleak context', he writes, 'I want to bring the dynamic and dialectical modernism of the nineteenth century to life again'.⁷⁴

While Anderson discloses some of the problems with Berman's periodisation, we might also identify two other principal areas where the latter's conception of modernity falls short.⁷⁵ Firstly, his study seems to suffer from eurocentrism, especially in the case of what he perceives as the third and final phase of modernity, when the process of modernisation expands to take in virtually the whole world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieves spectacular triumphs in art and thought. Although he states that modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, Berman focuses his attention mainly on the socio-economic, political, philosophical and aesthetic processes that originate within European parameters or within the parameters of peoples of European descent. There is no consideration of the socio-cultural and political impact of the radical-democratic, anti-imperialist struggles that immediately followed the colonial and neo-colonial expansion of the late nineteenth century and that continued until the nineteen sixties and early seventies. Nor does Berman give any consideration to the political resistances to US and European interventionism in Africa and the Caribbean during the early twentieth century and the related

⁷⁴ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 35.

⁷⁵ Berman's periodisation has also been challenged by feminist critics. Joan Kelly, for example, has argued in *Women, History, and Theory* that periodisation is one of the main areas of historical research that has been problematised by the new women's history and its focus on the social conditions under which history unfolds. Kelly questions Berman's enthusiasm for the great revolutionary wave of the 1790s as these Revolutions expressly excluded women from the very liberty and equality that they proclaimed. She also questions how much of the creativity and novelty of Baudelaire's heroism of modern life - which Berman celebrates in Section 3 - was actually available to the bulk of the women of Paris during the mid-nineteenth century. In short, Kelly contends that Berman's conception of the nineteenth-century as the classical or 'golden age' of modernist writing is highly questionable from a feminist point of view. See Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2-4.

achievements in art and thought.⁷⁶ Berman's analysis is strikingly narrow here, presenting only one side of the modern experience. Imperialism is one of the defining features of modernity, yet it receives little attention in Berman's thesis. To put it in Berman's own terms, imperialism is part of the globalising tendency of modernity, part of what it means to be modern and is experienced, albeit in different forms, not only by those living in the metropolitan core, but also by those who live in the colonial peripheries.

More immediately to his own concerns, he fails to discuss the demographic dislocations within the rural US South in the early twentieth century or the struggles of Black Americans for democratic rights that gave birth to Jazz and to the Harlem Renaissance.⁷⁷ In the last two sections of Chapter Five, Berman addresses the contradictions of city life in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, using the example of New York City. Here he examines the phenomenon of gentrification, the destructions of the old tenements and the rise of the new commercial districts within the city, emphasising the socioeconomic and aesthetic transformations that were brought about in this context. Despite the fact that he mentions the plight of the Black and Hispanic populations involved in these processes, he ignores the urban transformations that were generated by the social resistances of recently dispossessed (im)migrants when they attempted to reconstitute their urban communities.⁷⁸ In Berman's text, the urban development policies and the mega-expressway networks mainly appear as the abstract and aesthetic effects of the will to power of Robert

⁷⁶ See Gladys Jimenez-Munoz, 'Review Essay: Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*' in *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness* Vol. 1. No. 1 (2002), 28 October 2002.
<http://www.proudfleshjournal.com/proudflesh/vol1.1/toc1.1.htm>

⁷⁷ See Houston A. Baker's influential study *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁷⁸ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 324-25.

Moses and of white men such as him.⁷⁹ Berman does not seem to understand how these programs and public works served as the means through which capital and the state attempted to disarticulate the social cohesion and resistances of these impoverished minorities while furthering their isolation and segregation with respect to the more well-off portions of the city. Berman in this sense ignores the politico-coercive dimension of the top-down transformation of urban space. Once again he appears to be betraying his own dialectical method by ignoring the profound contradictions of the modern experience.

Mike Davis has argued that 'the wave of ghetto insurrections between 1964 and 1969 powerfully concentrated the attention of urban developers and corporate architects on the problem of cordoning off the downtown financial districts, and other zones of high property values, from inner-city residential neighbourhoods'.⁸⁰ In his discussion of architectural modernism's propensity to aspire towards an elite, urban pastoralism, Berman quotes Le Corbusier's 1929 slogan, 'we must kill the street'. From Berman's perspective, the inner logic of the new urban environment, from Atlanta's Peachtree Plaza to Detroit's Renaissance Center, has been the functional segmentation and class segregation of the old modern street, with its volatile mixture of people and traffic, businesses and homes, rich and poor.⁸¹ Berman's otherwise powerful evocation of modernist New York, however, pays no

⁷⁹ For alternatives, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Picador, 1990) and *Ecology of Fear* (London: Picador, 1999).

⁸⁰ Mike Davis has argued that since the ghetto rebellions of the late 1960s a racist as well as class imperative of spatial separation has been paramount in urban culture. Berman does make reference to particular aspects of urban renewal policies (for example, his brief description of the successful opposition in Manhattan's Lower East Side to one specific Moses' project), but he fails to realise the extent to which these Second World War policies are themselves part of a political counter-resistance effort by commercial and governmental interests. Davis also points out that this type of policy is present even in some of the urban remodelling efforts that were carried out in Europe during the nineteenth century. This possibility is repeatedly overlooked by Berman in his treatment of Baudelaire's Paris or Pushkin's St. Petersburg. See Mike Davis, 'The Postmodernist City', *New Left Review*, Vol.1, No.151 (May-June 1985), 106-113.

⁸¹ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 168.

attention to the decisive role of urban counter-insurgency in defining the essential terms of the contemporary built environment.⁸² For all his claims to dialectics and dynamism, and despite all his declarations in favour of freedom, justice, and the struggles in the streets, Berman does not see the rich complexity and multi-levelled relationships that lock together, in conflict, the bureaucratic and propertied forces promoting these socio-economic and political transformations and the diverse social groups resisting them. In this sense, he oversimplifies, reduces, and underestimates the depth and extension of these resistances.

These reservations should not diminish the relevance of Berman's temporal demarcations but if modernism is, as Berman argues, inherently globalising, then a powerful dimension of the globalising impulse is absent from Berman's own thesis. The growth of the modern city went hand in hand with colonialism and the construction of national identity. It is on the landscape of the metropolitan city that many of the inherent contradictions of the colonial system are visible. As Ashis Nandy reminds us, slums are among the first visible signs of modernisation in the Third World and the ubiquitous presence of the slum-dwellers is matched by the embarrassment their presence generates among the privileged inhabitants of the metropolis. The slums, Nandy argues, can be designated as the 'unintended city', the city that is the invisible underside of the metropolis and without which the visible city cannot exist.⁸³

In addition to providing a critique of Berman, Anderson's 'Modernity and Revolution' offers an alternative account of modernism. In this essay Anderson argues for a conjunctural explanation of the wide variety of aesthetic practices and

⁸² Davis, 'The Postmodernist City', 111.

⁸³ Ashis Nandy, 'Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics', *Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.

ideas known as modernism. He proposes that modernism should be ‘understood as a cultural field of force “triangulated”’ by three important coordinates:

The first of these is . . . the codification of a highly formalised *academicism* in the visual and other arts, which itself was institutionalised within official regimes of state and society, still massively pervaded, often dominated by aristocratic or landowning classes that were in one sense “superseded” no doubt, but in others were still setting the political and cultural tone in country after country of pre-First World War Europe . . . The second co-ordinate is then a logical complement of the first: the still incipient, hence essentially *novel*, emergence within these societies of key technologies or inventions of the second industrial revolution; that is the telephone, radio, automobiles, aircraft, and so on . . . [Thirdly,] the imaginative proximity of social revolution. The extent of hope or apprehension that the prospect of such arouses varies widely, but over most of Europe it was ‘in the air’ during Belle Époque itself.⁸⁴

Anderson’s thesis therefore, is that modernism ‘arose at the intersection between a semi-aristocratic order, a semi-industrialised capitalist economy, a semi-emergent, or insurgent labour movement’.⁸⁵ Each of these co-ordinates contributed to the emergence of the force-field defining modernism. The persistence of the *anciens régimes* and the academicism concomitant with them sustained an important range of cultural values ‘against which insurgent forms of art could measure themselves but also in terms of which they could partially articulate themselves’.⁸⁶ Without a common enemy, there was little or no unity within the wide variety of new modernist artistic practices that emerged: it was their common hostility to the ‘consecrated canons’ of the academy – neoclassical, romantic and realist – and to the cultural orthodoxies of the *ancien régime* that constituted their identity.

⁸⁴ Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, 324-5.

⁸⁵ Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, 326.

⁸⁶ Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, 325.

However, if the modernists resisted the official academy, they also rejected the commodification of art within the marketplace as any viable alternative to conventional *ancien regime* taste. The Old Order, with its conception of art as a higher vocation, could afford the modernists some alternative to a crassly commercial conception of the purpose of art. Lastly, the combined stimuli produced by the rapid technological advancement of the second wave of industrialism, and the prospect of revolution ‘more proximate and tangible than it had ever been’ created a climate of both utopian exhilaration and apocalyptic pessimism in which it was possible, realistically, to imagine a radical transformation of the social order.⁸⁷ As a result, it is difficult to assign any one political allegiance to modernism, which could accommodate the revolutionary socialism of Bertolt Brecht or Sergei Eisenstein, on one hand, and, on the other, the fascism of Wyndam Lewis or Ezra Pound.

‘Modernity and Revolution’ was Anderson’s contribution to a conference entitled ‘Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture’ held at the University of Illinois in 1983. One of the key concepts dominating Anderson’s thinking in the years preceding ‘Modernity and Revolution’ was the concept of revolution, and the presence of that concept is strongly felt within that essay. In his earlier essays, Anderson had argued that the prospect of socialist revolution in the West had diminished. The Portuguese Revolution had failed, and, perhaps more importantly, the Fourth International had failed to respond to the practical challenges of the Portuguese situation.⁸⁸ Against those who argued that ‘revolutions’ were ongoing on a smaller scale across the world, he argued that:

⁸⁷ Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, 324-56.

⁸⁸ Perry Anderson, ‘Communist Party History’, in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1981), 155.

Revolution is a term with a precise political meaning; the political overthrow from below of one state order and its replacement by another. Nothing is to be gained by diluting it across time or extending it over departments of social space. In the first case, it becomes indistinguishable from simple reform ... ; in the second ... , it dwindles to a mere metaphor. ... Against these slack devaluations of the term, it is necessary to insist that revolution is a punctual and not a permanent process ... What would be distinctive about a socialist revolution that created a genuine post-capitalist democracy is that the new state would be truly transitional towards the practicable limits of its own self-dissolution into the associated life of society as a whole.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, in the absence of any such Revolution, a second Cold War was being mobilised on every front by the United States under Ronald Reagan, which was being enthusiastically supported by an allied regime in Britain under Margaret Thatcher. For Anderson, socialism was no longer a realistic possibility in the First World, it was 'stalled and potentially imperilled' in the Second, and 'tarnished and/or beleaguered' in the Third.⁹⁰ The question of revolution is rarely considered in the academic left nowadays, so its strongly felt presence in 'Modernity and Revolution' can seem a little surprising to contemporary readers.

Anderson's argument about the temporality of modernism's emergence is largely persuasive, although it has been subject to some critique, particularly in relation to his characterisation of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. His analysis is derived, as he directly acknowledges, from Arno Mayer's *The Persistence of the Old Regime*.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Anderson, 'Communist Party History', 44. It is also worth comparing this passage to Anderson's long question to Raymond Williams, where he distinguishes between political revolution and post-revolutionary social transformations in *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 419-20.

⁹⁰ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 329. This reading of Mayer and Anderson is informed by Alex Callinicos's reading in *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 41-46.

⁹¹ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 324. Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (London: Verso, 1981). The influence may have been reciprocal: Mayer lists Anderson among those who read drafts of the crucial first chapters of his book.

Mayer's interpretation of Europe at the beginning of the First World War centres on the claim that:

down to 1914 Europe was pre-eminently pre-industrial and pre-bourgeois, its civil societies being deeply grounded in economies of labour-intensive agriculture, consumer manufacture and petty commerce. Admittedly, industrial capitalism and its class formations, notably the bourgeoisie and the factory proletariat, made vast strides, especially after 1890. But they were in no position to challenge or supplant the tenacious structures of the pre-existent order.⁹²

Agriculture, Mayer suggests, was the most important sector of the European economy, underpinning the political dominance of the aristocracy and more generally, of the landed classes across Europe – a condition exhibited by the monarchical character of every major European state up until the First World war, with the exception of France. Mayer argues that the bourgeoisie were politically subordinate, and adapted themselves to the *anciens régimes*. Instead of seeking to overthrow the old monarchies or emergent industrialists, they sought to imitate the upper-class lifestyles and to acquire the landed estates of the aristocracy. Therefore, it was not unusual that the education system, with its emphasis on the classics, still transmitted the values of Europe's agrarian notables and that 'in form, content and style, the artefacts of high culture continued to be anchored and swathed in the conventions that relayed and celebrated traditions supportive of the old order'.⁹³ This could also be explained as an attempt to integrate bourgeois and aristocrat into a common ruling class rather than to subordinate one group to the other.

⁹² Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 17.

⁹³ Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 189.

Mayer's argument can be seen in the context of the debate that was taking place in British Marxist Left about the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁹⁴ Alex Callinicos suggests that an alternative Marxist perspective could adopt Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development in order to provide a more complete analysis.⁹⁵ Trotsky's concept of combined and uneven development lies in his attempt, after the 1905 Russian Revolution, to characterise the crisis of Tsarist society: the combination of a predominantly feudal rural order with pockets of industrial capitalism based on very advanced material imported from the West made Russia peculiarly vulnerable to social convulsions liable to challenge autocracy and bourgeoisie alike.⁹⁶ Mayer argues that 'within a decade and a half [of 1900] the labour movement and the subject nationalities suffered even greater setbacks that exposed their own intrinsic weaknesses and made plain the strength and resolves of governments to contain them. Even the great popular upheaval in Russia 1905-1906 followed this pattern'.⁹⁷

The stress on the contradictory unity of the *ancien régimes* and industrial capitalism would compel us to slightly modify Anderson's analysis of the historical context of modernism rather than to refute it. This allows us to clarify the anomalous status of England and understand why, as Anderson observes, England, unlike much of Europe and America, was unable to produce a 'significant native movement of

⁹⁴ See Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis' in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, eds., *Towards Socialism* (London: Fontana/NLR, 1965) and 'The Figures of Descent', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 161 (January-February, 1987), 20-77. The most extended response to Anderson is Ellen Meiksins Woods, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London: Verso, 1991). For further criticism see also E. P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1978), M. Barratt Brown, 'Away With All Great Arches', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 167 (January-February, 1988) and C. Barker and D. Nicholls, eds., *The Development of British Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

⁹⁵ Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), 161.

⁹⁶ Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution / Results and Prospects* translated by Brian Pearce, (London: New Park Publications, 1962). See in particular *Results and Prospects* (1906), 169-183.

⁹⁷ Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 301.

modernist type in the first decades of this century'.⁹⁸ As we have already seen, Terry Eagleton's *Exiles and Émigrés* develops this point assertively, arguing that Anglophone modernism is essentially the product of exiles. But, as Anderson argues, Britain was a thoroughly bourgeois society even before its relatively gradual but immense industrialisation. By the late nineteenth century, it did not offer the sharp contrast between old and new provided by the comparatively sudden onset of industrial capitalism in genuinely *ancien régime* orders such as Prussia, Russia and Austria-Hungary. This emphasis on the contradictory unity of the declining *anciens régimes* and the emerging industrial capitalist order explains both the relatively slight role played by indigenous English writers in developing high modernism and the more decisive contribution made by American émigrés. The work of Eliot and Pound, for example, was characterised by an sharp awareness of the contrast between the traditional European high culture they assimilated and the exceptional social transformations fashioned by rapid capitalist industrialisation, available in a much more aggravated form in the United States, than in Britain.

Anderson's general claim in 'Modernity and Revolution' that modernism emerged in 'the space between a still usable classical past, a still indeterminate technical present, and a still unpredictable political future' has been widely accepted by scholars working within the field of modernism.⁹⁹ With the emergence of postcolonial theory in the 1980s, the absence of any engagement with the topic of empire within Anderson's schema was noted. Anderson's essay has clearly

⁹⁸ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 323.

⁹⁹ Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', 326. Critics who have utilised Anderson's thesis on modernism include Terry Eagleton in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995); Fredric Jameson in *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002); Joe Cleary in 'Towards a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature', *boundary 2*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 2004), 207-41 and Emer Nolan, 'Modernism and the Irish Revival' in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157-72.

reformulated how Marxist cultural theorists think about the history and geography of modernism. Where once discussions had focused mainly on modernism as an expression of advanced capitalist urban life, now, with Eagleton's emphasis on modernism as a culture of exile and émigrés, and Anderson's accent on modernism as a clash between modern and pre-modern cultures, the weight had shifted towards understanding modernism as a clash between metropolitan and peripheral cultures. With Raymond Williams's entry into the debate with the essay 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism' the terms of the debate advanced somewhat further with the introduction of the question of empire.

1.5 Raymond Williams

The years following the publication of Anderson's 'Modernity and Revolution' saw a series of articles about modernism by a number of leading Marxist intellectuals, all of which either implicitly or explicitly responded to Anderson's thesis. Raymond Williams had been the dominant Marxist critic of the post-Second World War period.¹⁰⁰ Throughout his career, Williams attempted to understand literature and related cultural forms not as the outcome of a series of isolated aesthetic adventures, but as the manifestation of an intense social development that involves a series of complex relationships between authorial ideologies, institutional processes, and generic/aesthetic forms. For much of the 1980s, Williams was preoccupied with the question of modernism and at the time of his death in 1988 was working on a 'possible book' that would be titled *The Politics of Modernism*. The book was

¹⁰⁰ His former student Terry Eagleton wrote in 1989 that 'when the historical record comes to be soberly reviewed, Williams will be accorded the status of the single most masterly, original cultural thinker in Britain of the twentieth century'. See Terry Eagleton, 'Foreword', Alan O'Connor, *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics* (Oxford Blackwell, 1989), vii.

compiled by Tony Pinkney, a student and friend of Williams, from notes, lectures and previously published material, and published posthumously.¹⁰¹

In his earlier work, *The Country and the City*, published in 1973, Williams had conceived of modernism as the product of the Western metropolis.¹⁰² In one of the closing chapters of this study, 'The New Metropolis', he argues that 'one of the last models of the "city and country" is the system we know as imperialism'.¹⁰³ Williams extends the model provided by his contrast of the country and the city to the explanation of international relationships, such as those between metropolitan centres and underdeveloped nations. However, he concludes that this country/city pattern is simply replicated on a wider scale within colonial or postcolonial countries. As his editor Tony Pinkney has pointed out, what is absent from Williams's thesis at this time was any analysis of how imperialism registers within the modernism of the European metropolitan cities, not as a 'world-system' but as part of 'the internal mutations' of the City 'as a result of such a system'.¹⁰⁴ It was this absence that Williams sought to address in his later work.

In 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism' (1985) Williams conceives of a new frame in which to view Anderson's thesis in 'Modernity and Revolution' and in so doing adds an important new dimension to Anderson's work, that of imperialism.¹⁰⁵ However, as we will see, Williams

¹⁰¹ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Tony Pinkney, ed., (London and New York, Verso, 1989). Pinkney worked from Williams's handwritten outline, earlier published and unpublished material, even lecture notes, to assemble the book that Williams did not live to complete. Raymond Williams died in January 1988.

¹⁰² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁰³ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 335.

¹⁰⁴ Tony Pinkney, 'Introduction', *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, 14. [Pinkney's emphasis].

¹⁰⁵ Raymond Williams, 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism' in Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. The article first appeared as 'The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism', in Edward Timms and David Kelly, eds., *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 13-24.

incorporation of empire into the debate on modernism is at best tentative. Williams, like Anderson, attempts to periodise modernism, but he does so by tracing the effects of cultural imperialism *within* Europe that accompanies the latter's domination of the world. Williams argues that the most important cultural factor in the modernist shift that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century was the changing character of the metropolis. The modern metropolis is not simply a large city or a national capital; it is the site where new social, cultural and economic relations, 'beyond both city and nation in their older senses', were constructed.¹⁰⁶ He stresses the importance of immigration in the shaping of metropolitan culture, not only thematically in terms of the modernist writer's preoccupation with strangeness, distance and alienation, but crucially at the deeper level of form:

Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices.¹⁰⁷

Williams is essentially arguing that it is at the level of form and language that the metropolitan culture registers itself in modernist writing.¹⁰⁸ It is often necessary for an immigrant to acquire a new language, allowing him or her a peculiarly intense relationship to the new language as it is being acquired. To the immigrant, language is not a customary or naturalised medium, it is something fluid, and can be shaped

¹⁰⁶ Williams, 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism', 45.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism', 45.

¹⁰⁸ This essay could also be seen as prefiguring Jameson's argument that imperialism is present within modernism at the level of form, as a space or gap between what the text can say and what it feels the need to gesture towards. See Frederic Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism' in Seamus Deane, ed., *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). Jameson also argues in *The Political Unconscious* that within modernism the political registers at the level of the unconscious. See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1981).

and reshaped to create productive types of distance and strangeness.¹⁰⁹ The modernist metropolitan city is the site where assorted languages, images and styles are filtered. As Williams notes, these cities of modernism were not ‘mere melting pot[s]’; rather, they offered ‘an intense and visually and linguistically exciting process in [their] own right’ out of which the remarkable new forms of modernism emerged. Despite the openness and complexity of the early twentieth-century metropolis, it lacked ‘a formed and settled society’ to which these new kinds of work could be related and understood.¹¹⁰ As a result modernist literature placed a greater emphasis than ever before on the medium and form of the work of art.

Williams concludes by arguing that it is important to see the imperial and capitalist metropolis as a ‘specific historical form’ at different stages – London, Paris, Berlin, New York. Understanding the impact of imperialism on modernism may involve looking at the metropolis from the outside, from the perspective of the periphery where forces quite different to those in the metropolitan core were at play. Williams reassures us that this does not have to mean a lessening in the importance of the ‘major artistic and literary works which were shaped within the metropolitan perception’.¹¹¹ Rather, it means that the metropolitan centre can no longer interpret its own processes as universal ones. Williams writes: ‘It should no longer be possible to present these specific and traceable processes as if they were universal, not only in history but as it were above and beyond it.’¹¹² For Williams, the formulation of the modernist universals is in all instances a productive but imperfect and ultimately ‘fallacious’ response to particular conditions of closure, break-down, failure and frustration. It is, he concludes, ‘[f]rom the necessary negations of these conditions,

¹⁰⁹ Williams, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’, 45-6.

¹¹⁰ Williams, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’, 46.

¹¹¹ Williams, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’, 47.

¹¹² Williams, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’, 47.

and from the stimulating strangeness of a new and (as it seemed) unbonded social form, [that] the creative leap to the only available universality – of raw material, of medium, of process – was impressively and influentially made'.¹¹³

Williams published a second essay on modernism, two years later in 1987, entitled 'When Was Modernism?' in which he again challenges Anderson's periodisation of modernism.¹¹⁴ In this essay he argues that the first challenge that any critic of modernism must address is the difficulty with the term itself:

'Modernism' as a title for a whole cultural movement and moment has . . . been retrospective as a general term since the 1950s, thereby stranding the dominant version of 'modern' or even 'absolute modern' between, say, 1890 and 1940. We still habitually use 'modern' [to denote] a world between a century and half a century old. When we note that in English at least . . . 'avant-garde' may be indifferently used to refer to Dadaism seventy years after the event or to recent fringe theatre, the confusion both willed and involuntary which leaves our own deadly separate era in anonymity becomes less an intellectual problem and more an ideological perspective.¹¹⁵

What Williams is challenging here is the generally accepted periodisation of modernism, arguing that what is called modernism ignores the contributions made by realist writers such as Dickens, Gogol or Flaubert to the understanding of urban culture. Instead, more self-reflexive texts, such as those by Proust, Kafka or Joyce, are preferred by literary critics, even though, as Williams argues, without the work of great realists such as Dickens, a novel like *Ulysses* would have been impossible. He writes, 'in excluding the great realists, this version of modernism refuses to see how

¹¹³ Williams, 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism', 47.

¹¹⁴ Raymond Williams, 'When was Modernism?' in Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. The essay was originally delivered by Williams as a lecture on 17 March 1987 at the University of Bristol. The version referred to here is reconstructed by Fred Inglis from his notes of the lecture and Williams's own brief notes and first appeared in *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 175 (May-June 1989), 48-52. In a short preface to the article Inglis describes the notes as 'merely composed of jottings and very broad headings ('Metropolis', 'Exiles', '1840s', '1900-1930' etc.)'.

¹¹⁵ Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', 32.

they devised and organised a whole vocabulary and its structures of figures of speech with which to grasp the unprecedented social forms of the industrial city'.¹¹⁶ For Williams, it is not just within literature that the canonical periodisation of modernism is problematic. He also contends that the Impressionist painters of the 1860s represented a new innovative vision and used new techniques to develop their representations of modern Parisian life, but only the Post-Impressionists and the Cubists are located within the modernist tradition. Similar questions can be posed of the entire literary canon and, as Williams argues, the answers appear just as arbitrary: he dismisses the Symbolist poets of the 1880s in favour of the Imagists, Surrealists, Futurists, Formalists and others from 1919 onwards.¹¹⁷ The problem, Williams concludes, is that modernism as a category or ideology was a retrospective construction and that in each case this retroactive category selects the later most experimental groups and hence the self-reflective text occupies the centre-stage in the public and aesthetic imagination. Therefore, what has come to be defined as modernism is in fact a 'highly selective version of the modern', which then 'offers to appropriate the whole of modernity.'¹¹⁸

Williams does acknowledge that a number of important breaks occur in all of the arts towards the end of the nineteenth century. Emphasising the importance of creating a material basis for the history of modernism, he argues that any explanation for these changes and their ideological consequences must begin with the unprecedented advances in cultural production that occurred. Photography, cinema, radio, television, reproduction and recording all made critical advances during the period now identified as modernist. The various movements within modernism, from

¹¹⁶ Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', 32.

¹¹⁷ Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', 32-33.

¹¹⁸ Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', 33.

the Futurists, Imagists and Surrealists, to the Cubists, Formalists and Constructivists, Williams concludes, are all products, historically, of changes in the public media:

These media, the technological investment which mobilized them, and the cultural forms which both directed the investment and expressed in its preoccupations, arose in the new metropolitan cities, the centres of the also new imperialism, which offered themselves as trans-national capitals of an art without frontiers.¹¹⁹

Tony Pinkney argues that Williams's position can be seen to echo Walter Benjamin's attempt to situate the origins of modernism in Paris – the capital of the Nineteenth Century. Benjamin argued that Dadaism worked by trying to create through the literary and visual image the effects which are found today in film. This, Pinkney argues, anticipates 'Williams's own sense of the prefigurative dramatic imaginings of Ibsen and Strindberg'. Benjamin also found that in the great modern cities 'the shock experience has become the norm' and argued that 'in a film, perception in the form of shocks were established as a formal principle'.¹²⁰ However, for Williams, Benjamin's reliance on Baudelaire as a model for modernism presents a real impediment because it stretches the category of modernism beyond any possible historical specificity. Despite the initial stress on the late nineteenth century as a unique phase of Parisian history, Benjamin sees *Les Fleur du Mal* (1857), the first volumes of Proust's *À la recherché du temps perdu* (1909-1912), and the anti-fascist aesthetic of the 1930s as key modernist works. Williams work therefore, forces us to return to the intractable dilemma of periodisation.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', 33-34.

¹²⁰ Pinkney, 'Introduction', *The Politics of Modernism*, 11-12.

¹²¹ Benjamin's theory of modernism is rooted in the work of Baudelaire and, as we have already seen, modernism for Baudelaire is a matter of theme rather than form. Therefore, as Pinkney correctly argues, a modernism grounded in Baudelaire cannot converge with the specificity of the extraordinary formalist achievements of later modernism. See Pinkney, 'Introduction', *The Politics of Modernism*, 12.

1.6 Conclusions: Modernism and Modernity

In this chapter we have seen how a number of key Anglophone Marxist intellectuals reconfigured traditional conceptions of the relationship between modernism and the city. They argued that modernism could no longer simply be understood as a response to the contradictions and challenges of urban life, but that it must be reconceived in terms of exile, the clash between dying *ancien régimes* and an emerging modern consumer society and ultimately as a cultural collision between the imperial core and the colonised periphery. These debates were of particular importance because they forced a reconsideration of our understanding of modernism, displacing the importance of the city in favour of a conjunctural explanation that sees modernism as a product of the uneven development of global capitalism.

As we have seen the work of Perry Anderson was one of the central contributions to these discussions. The importance of his 'Modernity and Revolution' essay is evident in the fact that it clearly informs a number of key contemporary works, in particular Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995) and Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* (2002).¹²² Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* in particular, confirms the overall strength of Anderson's argument. Coming more than ten years after the publication of Williams's work on modernism, and nearly twenty years after Anderson's essay, Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* offers an interesting indicator of where the debate about modernism stands today.

Jameson declares that the project that has come to be referred to as modernity is over. It may not be complete as a project but whatever promise it once possessed

¹²² Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995). Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).

has vanished and it has become a 'modern form of antiquity'. It has been replaced, he argues, particularly in the aftermath of postmodernism, by 'the reminting of the modern', its repackaging and production for purchase in the intellectual market place.¹²³ Modernisation, he argues, had long been an inescapable dimension of modernity, and modernity has always had something to do with technology and thus, eventually, with progress. The invention of modernisation theory after the Second World War allowed the idea of 'modernity' to become synonymous with democracy, justice and freedom. Jameson cites Oskar Lafontaine's critique of the widespread misappropriation of the term:

The words 'modernization' and 'modernity' have been degraded to fashionable concepts under which you can think anything at all. If you try to figure out what people called 'modernizers' today understand under the term 'modernity', you find that it is little else than economic and social adaptation to the supposed constraints of the global market. The concept of modernity is reduced to purely economic and technical categories.¹²⁴

In other words, the term 'modernity' becomes code for eliminating alternatives to the capitalist mode of production. Thus, Jameson recommends that we use the term capitalism instead of modernity, arguing that the latter term is designed 'to exclude old problems (and to produce new and more interesting ones).'¹²⁵ However, Jameson rightly argues that many of the connections between modernity, modernisation and modernism can only be understood in reference not just to capitalism but to socialism or utopianism.¹²⁶

¹²³ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 7.

¹²⁴ Oskar Lafontaine, cited in Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 9.

¹²⁵ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 9.

¹²⁶ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 124. Christopher Prendergast makes a similar point in a review of Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* for *New Left Review*. He notes the absence from Jameson's work of two of the most recent and influential accounts of modernism in relation to the Russian Revolution and the early years of the Soviet Union: T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) and Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and*

Jameson returns, as both Anderson and Williams had done earlier, to the question of periodisation. Drawing on the work of Anderson in 'Modernity and Revolution', Jameson locates classical modernism in a 'transitional era' poised between 'two distinct worlds', those of the traditional, agricultural and peasant order, and the new machine-based industrialism, where the 'new technological machinery brings with it its own aesthetic shock, in the way it erupts without warning into the older pastoral and feudal landscape'.¹²⁷ Russia, Italy, and to some extent pre-First World War France, provide the key examples that support Anderson's periodisation of modernism as dating, roughly, from the late nineteenth century through to the eve of the Second World War. Like Anderson, Jameson reminds us that if this is modernism as the 'genuine' article, it did not typically name itself as such but was characterised rather by a plurality of terms: Constructivism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, and so forth. The homogenising label 'modernism' was a later application, retrospectively conferred, partly with a view to imposing a seamlessly linear temporality on an allegedly unified field.¹²⁸ Modernity, Jameson argues, is tied to a situation of 'incomplete' modernisation. This is also the case with the decisive moment of modernism, which is understood as a set of aesthetic doctrines and artistic practices, like 'classical' or 'high' modernism.

Here, Jameson essentially recapitulates Anderson's theorisation of modernism [and later, postmodernism] in terms of a complex conjuncture or intersection of diverse socio-political and economic forces.¹²⁹ As previously discussed, Anderson's periodisation of modernism dates roughly from the late

Catastrophe (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2000). See Christopher Prendergast, 'Codeword Modernity', *New Left Review*, Vol. 2, No. 24 (November-December, 2003), 96.

¹²⁷ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 143.

¹²⁸ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 164.

¹²⁹ Anderson would later reassert his theory on the origins of modernism in his study of postmodernism, *The Origins of Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1998), 81ff.

nineteenth century through to the eve of the Second World War. Jameson's periodisation in *A Singular Modernity* is somewhat similar. He argues that there is no intelligent historical narrative without a model of causality, however much we may need to escape linear historicist constructions. With modernity, the epistemology of the break becomes key to the ideology of modernity itself, in its repeated assertions of the New and its casting of temporality in terms of an ongoing series of radical ruptures or breaks. Breaks, Jameson points out, do not always have to be dramatic. In fact, they can, at times, be relatively prolonged and constitute mini-periods in their own right, whose logic is governed by the principle of the transition which mediates between a 'continuist' and 'discontinuist' conception of history.¹³⁰ Transitional zones can therefore be thought of as sites of overlap in which the various categories of 'pre', 'early', 'less', 'more' and 'late' all participate. This notion of transition is particularly important when we come to think of the connections between modernity, modernisation and modernism. Traditionally, the connections between the three categories have tended to be understood in terms of a linear narrative that posits modernity as the new historical situation, modernisation as the process whereby we get there, and modernism as a reaction to that situation and that process alike, a reaction that can be aesthetic and ideological, just as it can be negative as well as positive. But this position cannot stand up to scrutiny especially, argues Jameson, when one considers the highly varied paths to and through the experience of modernity and the vastly different and heterogeneous temporalities of modernisation. Nor is modernity a completed form of industrial and technological modernisation;

¹³⁰ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* 146.

the latter is in fact what defines postmodernity. Rather modernity is for Jameson, as mentioned earlier, tied to a situation of 'incomplete' modernisation.¹³¹

Jameson is also close to Anderson in reminding us that modernism in practice was characterised by a plurality of terms such as Constructivism, Futurism, Cubism, and Surrealism. Here, Jameson introduces the term 'late modernism'. For him, late modernism is essentially a US event, a product of the Cold War. As Christopher Prendergast notes, Jameson uses the word 'late' not just in the temporal sense, post-Second World War, but in sense of a belated reprise that modifies and truncates some of the canonical features of early modernism.¹³² For Jameson, late modernism embodies a retreat from political alternatives to the rule of capital in favour of the 'autonomy' of art.

Jameson's work takes us to the contemporary moment. The legacy of these Anglophone Marxist debates continue to be felt, explicitly and implicitly, in contemporary discussions of modernism. While debates about the periodisation and spatial politics of modernism continue, they have often become subsumed into contextual debates about imperialism and postmodernism. The arguments that raged over postmodernism during the 1980s and early 1990s generated a need to periodise modernism. The question of whether postmodernism represented a radical break with modernism, or whether it simply signified the gradual degradation of modernism, was one of the dominant discussions of the period. Perry Anderson's explanation for the emergence of modernism as outlined in 'Modernity and Revolution' became a central focus in these debates. Secondly, as we will see in Chapter Two, the relationship between the metropolitan core and the periphery was given a new formulation with greater emphasis being afforded to the question of imperialism in

¹³¹ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 78.

¹³² Prendergast, 'Codeword Modernity', 136.

understanding not only the content, but also the formal concerns of modernism. Contemporary left-wing critics writing in the field of postcolonial literary studies have argued that imperialism is of central and constitutive importance to the category of modernism itself.

CHAPTER TWO

The Shadow of Empire: Marxism, Modernism and the Subject of Imperialism

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we reviewed how in the closing decades of the last century several leading Marxist cultural theorists in England and America were to challenge earlier orthodoxies concerning the relationship between modernism and urbanism. Disputing the commonplace claim that modernism was essentially an urban art-form integrally rooted in the most advanced capitalist regions of Europe and North America, Perry Anderson, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Raymond Williams argued instead that the most radical modernist experiments generally emerged in unevenly developed or semi-peripheral societies where the contradictions of modernity were to be found in their most aggravated forms. In these writings, the iconoclastic character of modernist art must be attributed not only to the sense of exhilaration or alienation provoked by urban life, the emergence of mass media, or new industrial technologies, but also to a longer and wider process of capitalist restructuring that produced a conjuncture defined by a clash between different types of pre-modern and mainly agricultural, semi-industrial and advanced industrial social formations. In these reformulated theories of modernism, writers who migrated from the more backward capitalist regions of Europe and America to the great European cultural capitals played a decisive role in the development of the new modernist movements and aesthetics.

But though they dramatically revised earlier conceptions of the historical and geographical coordinates of modernist literary production, the critical essays that we have already examined in the first chapter did not directly engage with the question of

European imperialism. The topic of empire did eventually begin to surface in these debates, but of the works already reviewed only Raymond Williams's 'Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism' accords that subject any real attention.¹ Even then, empire appears rather fleetingly and that essay is, as we have seen, essentially a reconstruction of jottings and lecture notes. Marxist reconceptions of the history and geography of modernism may have been dramatically broadened in their scope, then, but until the 1980s at least they still remained resolutely European and American in emphasis. The major Marxist controversies about modernism in this period were those that engaged with issues of exile and expatriation, the politics of subjectivity and style, the rise and decline of the avant-gardes, and the emergence of postmodernism.

Even after the emergence of postcolonial criticism in the 1980s the relationship between modernism and imperialism did not really receive much attention, at least not initially. In its early stages, most postcolonial criticism concentrated on the Victorian literature of high imperialism and on classical realist texts or else moved directly on to late-twentieth-century postcolonial writing.² The major landmarks of European

¹ Said has critiqued Williams on this point, arguing that, for Williams, English literature is ultimately about England. While Williams may acknowledge the 'transforming, liberating and threatening' culture created by empire in the nineteenth century, he does so, Said argues, 'without reference to India, Africa, the Middle East and Asia'. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 14.

² See, for example, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). *Orientalism* is widely acknowledged to be one of the founding theoretical texts of postcolonial theory. Said argues that the West has created a dichotomy between the reality of the East and the romantic notion of the 'Orient'. Equally the Middle East and Asia are presented as backward and unaware of their own history and culture. To fill this void, the West has created a culture, history, and future promise for them. It is onto this framework that, not only the study of the Orient, but also the political imperialism of Europe is constructed. See Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983). Parry emphasises Conrad's ambivalence towards imperialism, arguing that he invites the reader to scrutinise its ethical foundations. See also Gauri Viswanathan, *The Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Viswanathan argues that nineteenth-century literary texts functioned as a mirror of the ideal Englishman and became a mask of exploitation that disguised the material activities of the colonising British government. Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988) contends that deeply imperialist assumptions pervade Victorian narratives, from the adventure yarn through the realist novel and the 'Imperial Gothic' of fantasy fiction.

modernism were more or less bypassed in the early stages of postcolonial literary studies or at least they did not become the subject of extensive theoretical speculation in postcolonial circles. Eventually, however, several key figures in left-wing circles in the English and American academy did begin to broach the relationship between modernism and empire, sometimes tentatively and usually controversially, but in ways that have nonetheless ultimately established this as a significant topic of contemporary debate. In these readings, the history, geography and politics of modernism are again re-conceptualised. Now, the emergence of modernism is no longer viewed solely as a response to the crises of European urbanism or even as something provoked by the conditions of uneven development in Europe more generally; instead, modernism begins to be understood also as a reaction to a wider global crisis of empire. To put it another way, modernism ceases to be conceived exclusively in terms of wholly domestic European crises such as the devastations of the First World War, the rise of feminism and 'the new woman,' or the revolutionary threats posed by the collisions between right-wing reaction and socialism; instead, modernism is grasped, rather, as a process of cultural and aesthetic restructuring stimulated at once by European geographical expansion and by a sense of impending inter-imperial crisis.

Within the field of Anglo-American leftist cultural criticism, the key figures who have moved the relationship between modernism and imperialism into the foreground of cultural debate are Edward Said, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton. Said is clearly a connecting or mediating figure here: his work is heavily steeped in European and Anglo-

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 12, No. 1, (Autumn, 1985), 243-261. Spivak's essay, which looks at Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, offers a forceful critique of feminist individualism and its links to imperialism. Fredric Jameson's controversial 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text* No. 15 (Autumn 1986), 65-88, deals with realism and postcolonialism.

American traditions of left-wing cultural criticism, but in the 1980s he also became the leading theoretician associated with an emerging postcolonial studies.³ Not surprisingly, Joseph Conrad proves to be a key figure for Said, Jameson and Eagleton. Since his writings straddle the divide between a 'classical' realist Victorian literature of high imperialism and the early phases of high modernism, Conrad was an obvious figure through which to begin to think the connections between modernism and imperialism. Long before the 1980s, Said had already been fascinated by the figure of Conrad. He wrote his dissertation on Conrad at Harvard University in 1963 and published his first monograph, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, in 1966.⁴ Conrad had also figured in Eagleton's *Exiles and Émigrés* (1970), though less as a writer of empire in that instance than as an example of European exilic consciousness. Jameson devoted a virtuoso concluding chapter of his landmark study, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), to Conrad, embarking there on an ambitious attempt to connect Conrad's distinctive style

³ While Edward Said was not a Marxist, his work on the relationship between culture and imperialism frequently engages these questions in a manner that would be largely congenial to any Marxist theorist. Said has stated that: 'I have been more influenced by Marxists than Marxism or any other ism'. Indeed, Francis Mulhern included Said's essay on the topic of empire in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* in his edited collection of *Contemporary Marxist Criticism*, arguing that Said should be seen to be 'writing in solidarity with Marxism rather than as a declared opponent'. Francis Mulhern ed., *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism* (Longman: London, 1992), 97. However, Said has been highly critical of Marxism and of its dialectical conception of historical progress, which, Said argues, all too easily lends itself to a naïve celebration of western capitalist domination over the rest of the world. In *Orientalism* Said critiques Marx's 1853 article, 'The British Rule in India' where Marx argues that the British conquest of India, for all its vileness is, by sweeping aside the stagnant world of Oriental despotism, the best means of future progress. For Said, this passage represents the triumph of Orientalism in even the most critical European thought: 'as human material the Orient is less important than as an element in a romantic redemptive project'. See Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1985), 154. The Indian Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad responded to Said in his article 'Marx on India: a Clarification', which effectively serves as a reply to Said. See Aijaz Ahmad, 'Marx on India: a Clarification', *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1987), 331.

⁴ Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1966). Conrad's writing has been a major preoccupation for Said throughout his career. There is a long discussion of *Nostromo* in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), a chapter on Conrad in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1983), and an essay on Conrad and Nietzsche in *Reflections on Exile: Literary and Cultural Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

to the crises of European subjectivity provoked by the contradictions of high imperialism.⁵ As we will see in this chapter, it is mainly through Said's, Jameson's and Eagleton's critical wrestlings with Conrad that the subject of empire first begins to move in from the margins towards the centre of contemporary Marxist or left-wing literary theories and histories of modernism. This chapter will offer a review of the left-wing debates on Conrad that begin to gather force from the 1970s onwards. The object will not be to attempt to discuss Conrad's novels and short stories in their own right, but rather to document the ways in which Conrad's work becomes pivotal for left-wing attempts to theorise the relationship between modernism and empire.

Criticism on Conrad has a central place in any history of how contemporary Anglophone left-wing cultural theory first begins to engage with the question of modernism and imperialism. But there is also an Irish dimension to this narrative. Marxist engagements may begin with Conrad, but in later attempts to connect modernism and imperialism, the work of James Joyce (and to a lesser degree that of Yeats and Irish modernism more generally) also becomes significant. Because Ireland had a long and controversial history within the British Empire – it was the first colony to secede from the Empire in the twentieth century – and because Irish writers had made such a distinguished contribution to modernism, it was inevitable that Irish modernism would eventually play an important bridging function in these debates. But, even so, the link between Ireland, modernism and empire also owed something to personal connections in the world of Anglophone literary criticism. Though born and educated in England, Terry Eagleton's parents were Irish, and the Irish modernists had already

⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1981).

figured prominently in his account of modernism in *Exiles and Émigrés*.⁶ In his later career, Eagleton would immerse himself even more deeply in Irish literature, eventually writing several books on this topic, the most ambitious being *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, which was published in 1995. As has been observed, the development of postcolonial studies in the 1980s obviously impelled questions of culture and empire to the centre of literary studies, but in Ireland discussions of these issues took on a special intensity because they were conducted against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Northern Ireland. As part of a wider project by the group of intellectuals and writers collectively known as the Field Day Theatre Company, who were attempting to stimulate new debates on Irish cultural politics, Seamus Deane invited Said, Jameson and Eagleton to contribute to the Field Day pamphlet series.⁷ The short essays written in response to this invitation were later published collectively as a small volume called *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*.⁸ As is common with the pamphlet form, all of these essays were highly speculative and as such were to become controversial not only

⁶ Eagleton discusses his Irish background in his 2001 memoir, *The Gatekeeper*. See Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

⁷ The Field Day Theatre Company was founded in 1980 by the playwright Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea. Although Field Day never put forth a formal mission statement, their intention was to create a space, a 'fifth province', that would transcend the crippling oppositions of Irish politics. Its board of directors has included the writers Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, and Thomas Kilroy and the documentary filmmaker David Hammond. The Company was responsible for producing some of the key classics of modern Irish drama including Friel's *Translations* (1980), Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986) and Stuart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987). In addition to producing new plays, Field Day began in 1983 to publish literary and critical works ranging from pamphlets on Irish language and history, the five volume *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* 5 Vols. (1991, 2002), to an on-going series of essays and monographs edited by Deane. In 2005 it launched the annual *Field Day Review*.

⁸ See Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism, Irony and Commitment* (Derry: Field Day, 1988), Fredric Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism* (Derry: Field Day, 1988) and Edward Said, *Yeats and Decolonization* (Derry: Field Day, 1988). The three pamphlets were reprinted with an introduction by Seamus Deane in *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990). When Deane commissioned the articles he had declared that Field Day believed the troubles to be a late-colonial crisis. Writing in the introduction to the collection he argues that 'Ireland is the only Western European country that has had both an early and a late colonial experience. Out of that Ireland produced, in the first three decades of this century, a remarkable literature in which the attempt to overcome and replace the colonial experience by something other, something that would be "native" and yet not provincial, was a dynamic and central energy'. See Deane, 'Introduction', *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, 5.

within Ireland but also within the field of modernist studies. However, the controversies that they provoked have been productive since they have further widened the debates on modernism and imperialism that continue into the present.

2.2 Edward Said

The work of Edward Said has played a crucial role in revealing how the ideologies of imperialism have shaped the culture of modern Europe, and the writing of Joseph Conrad has occupied an important, if not central, position within this Saidian project.⁹ Many of Said's major texts – *Beginnings*, *The World, the Text and the Critic* and *Culture and Imperialism* – contain extensive analyses of Conrad's work. Said's first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, was an extended study of Conrad, which considered his complex process of self-definition, along with questions of space and time, the interconnections between truth and power, and the Eurocentric worldview imposed by European imperialism. Indeed, in his study of Said's work, Abdirahman Hussein has remarked how Said's postcolonial writings 'cannot be fully appreciated' without taking proper account of *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*.¹⁰

Said's judgement of Conrad at the end of this monograph was essentially a positive one:

Conrad's achievement is that he ordered the chaos of his existence into a highly patterned art that accurately reflected and controlled the realities with

⁹ This reading of Said, especially in relation to *Beginnings* is influenced by Abdirahman A. Hussein's analysis of Said work in *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (London and New York: Verso, 2002). See Chapter Three. 'Beginnings and Authority: Ideology, Critique, and Community', especially 111-122.

¹⁰ Hussein, *Edward Said*, 26, 226. Hussein has also highlighted how Said's book on Conrad has attracted little attention beyond a number of initial reviews, the majority of which were critical. See, for example, Douglas Hewitt, *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 19, (1968), 233-5 and P. W. McDowell, 'Review Essay: The Most Recent Books on Joseph Conrad,' in *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1968), 201-23.

which it dealt. His experience, as both man and writer, is unique in English literature: no expatriation was as complete or as complex as his, no literary production as profoundly strange and creative. Because he, like so many of his characters, lived life at the extreme, he was more acutely conscious of community even if, most of the time, his was a negative or critical view. He dramatized the plight of man divorced from and yet still incriminated by the past, the man committed to but paralyzed by society. Driven back to his individuality, he accepted its burdens and its uncompromisingly pessimistic vision of reality.¹¹

Conrad's importance for Said lies in his ability to reflect intensely and repeatedly on the problematic ethical and political implications of imperialism. He argues that Conrad's writing exhibits a deep ambivalence towards the European imperial project, what he terms 'a critical view from within' that highlights how high culture worked to conceal the operations of power and authority. This is not to argue that Said is blind to the imperialist dimension of Conrad's work; indeed he repeatedly acknowledges that Conrad was compromised by either his inability or unwillingness to see the victims of imperialism as anything other than 'natives'. Conrad, as understood by Said, is certainly a contradictory figure, but it is in these very contradictions that the nature of imperialism can be understood. As Hussein has commented:

Said's repeated interpretive confrontations with Conrad – as well as his occasional defence of Conrad against charges of racism – constitute an attempt to work through all these facets of Conrad's career, the career of a distinguished mind (Said's phrasing) struggling with the burdens of two powerful cultural currents, one inherited, the other adopted.¹²

As Said would later contend in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), Conrad was forced to come to terms, in a way that no other modernist writer was, with 'the change

¹¹ Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, 196.

¹² Hussein, *Edward Said*, 25-26.

from story telling as useful, communal art to novel writing as essentialized, solitary art'.¹³

In 1975, the Nigerian writer and critic, Chinua Achebe wrote an essay on Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* in which he argued that Conrad projects an image of 'triumphalist bestiality' and savagery onto Africa.¹⁴ The essay, 'An Image of Africa', became such a cornerstone of writing and criticism on Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* that it would be difficult to find any anthology of Conrad criticism since that does not implicitly consider or acknowledge Achebe's essay.¹⁵ Achebe argued that *Heart of Darkness* drew on a long tradition of Africanist discourse that represented that continent as a place of savagery and primeval darkness and as the antithesis to European progress and civilisation:

The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully 'at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks'. But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are

¹³ Edward Said, 'Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative' in Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1983), 101.

¹⁴ Chinua Achebe's 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' was first delivered as the Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 18, 1975. It was printed in *Scrutiny* 18 February, 1975, 31-43. It was published later in *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter 1977), 782-794 and reprinted in Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 1-20. [All references are to the latter edition]. Achebe's criticism of Conrad is not limited to this essay. His novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* can be understood as responses to *Heart of Darkness*, presenting the reader with a view of colonialism from the perspective of the colonised.

¹⁵ Achebe's argument that Conrad was 'a bloody racist' was probably most vehemently rejected by the critic Cedric Watts in his essay "'A Bloody Racist": About Achebe's View of Conrad', *Yearbook of English Studies*, No. 13 (1983), 196-209. Watt contends that Achebe takes Conrad out of context when he accuses him of being 'myopic and patronizing' and that Achebe's condemnation of *Heart of Darkness* as inhumane and illiberal redefines liberalism as racist illiberalism. Watts concludes that Achebe sees 'no distinction between King Leopold and Conrad – both are bloody racists.'

told that 'Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world'.¹⁶

For Achebe, Africa reminds Europe of its own primordial darkness and in acknowledging this it runs 'the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of its first beginnings'.¹⁷ Achebe rejects the claim that Conrad subjects Marlow and his view of Africa and the African to critical and ironic treatment. He argues that while Conrad certainly attempts to construct 'layers of insulation' between 'himself and the moral universe of his history', his concern is wasted because he fails to suggest, even tentatively, 'an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters'. Marlow, Achebe contends, enjoys the full confidence of Conrad:

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians, or wherever.¹⁸

The type of liberalism articulated here by both Marlow and Conrad, Achebe concludes, was evident in 'all the best minds' in Europe and America. While it took different forms, in different contexts, this western liberalism could never take seriously the notion of any real equality between black people and white people. Hence Conrad, Achebe contends, was 'a thoroughgoing racist', a fact that neither cannot nor should not be ignored. For

¹⁶ Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', 3. More recently, the Indian critic Homi Bhabha has made a similar argument, implicating Conrad in a conspiracy of silence that colonial writers fashioned in order to advance the aims of European imperialism. See Homi Bhabha, 'Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense', in P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan, eds, *Literary Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 203-218.

¹⁷ Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', 6.

¹⁸ Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', 12.

Achebe the fact that such racism is commonly either avoided or explained away is merely illustrative of his argument that 'white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked'. Thus, he writes:

Africa as a metaphysical battlefield [is] devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind! But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: NO, it cannot.¹⁹

While Achebe concludes that *Heart of Darkness* is racist and therefore cannot be considered a major work of art, he nevertheless acknowledges the aesthetic quality of Conrad's writing and the insight that he offers into the mindset of imperialism. However, he contends that however positive these achievements may be understood to be, they are not enough to erase the essentially racist nature of *Heart of Darkness*.

In his 1993 text *Culture and Imperialism* Said briefly defends Conrad against Achebe's criticisms as part of his wider exploration of the imperial mentalities that inform western culture. Said's starting point is his insistence on the maintenance of the integrity of the work of art. He argues that a writer's work cannot be conveniently collapsed into a general scheme and that the structures connecting novels to one another can have 'no existence outside the novels themselves'. For Said, this means that 'one gets the particular, concrete experience of "abroad" only in individual novels' and that, conversely, 'only individual novels can animate, articulate, embody the relationship for

¹⁹ Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', 14.

instance, between England and Africa.’²⁰ This, he concludes, projects an added responsibility onto the critic, obliging him or her to ‘read and analyse’, as opposed to simply summarising and judging ‘works whose paraphrasable content they might regard as politically and morally objectionable’.²¹ Said recognises that Achebe ‘understands how the form works when, in some of his own novels, he rewrites – painstakingly and with originality – Conrad’. However, he criticises Achebe for failing to acknowledge, in his critique of Conrad’s racism, the limitations placed upon Conrad by the aesthetic form of the novel itself. It is Said’s contention that the novel form not only consolidates social and political authority, but that it serves to normalise and validate that authority in the course of the narrative. This may appear to be paradoxical, but he argues that this is only the case if one ignores the fact that the constitution of the narrative subject, however strange, ‘is still a social act *par excellence*’ and therefore it ‘has behind or inside it the authority of history and society’.²² For Said, narrative contains three types of authority: author, narrator and community. The authority of the author allows him or her to write out the processes of a particular society in an suitable institutionalised manner, obeying standard conventions and models. The authority of the narrator allows the narrative to be anchored in a recognisable and therefore ‘existentially referential’ form. Finally, Said argues, there is what he terms, the authority of the ‘community’. This authority’s most recognisable form is that of the family, but it can also include the nation, geography or the ‘concrete historical moment’. These three forms of authority operated most vigorously and effectively in the early nineteenth century ‘as the novel opened up to history in an unprecedented way’. Conrad’s Marlow, Said concludes, can be understood

²⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 91.

²¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 91.

²² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 91 [Said’s emphasis]

to 'inherit all this directly'.²³ Therefore, unlike Achebe, Said understands the nineteenth-century novel, not as an isolated text, but as a historical narrative that is shaped by the 'real history of real nations'.²⁴

In the later *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), Said explicitly outlines his own particular approach to Conrad, differentiating himself from Achebe. He argues that it is 'imperative' that imperialist writers such as Conrad are recognised to be 'intrinsically worthwhile for today's non-European or non-Western reader, who is often either happy to dismiss them altogether as dehumanizing or insufficiently aware of the colonized people' (as Achebe does with Conrad), or else to understand them, 'in a way "above" the historical circumstances of which they were so much a part.'²⁵ Said argues that what characterises his own approach is that he attempts to understand writers like Conrad within their own context:

I see them contrapuntally, that is, as figures whose writing travels across temporal, cultural and ideological boundaries in unforeseen ways to emerge as part of a new ensemble *along with* later history and subsequent art. So, for instance, rather than leaving Conrad's compelling portrait of Leopold's Congo in an archive labelled as the dead-end rubbish bin of racist thinking, it seems to me far more interesting to read Conrad's late-nineteenth century works as – in all sorts of unforeseen proleptic ways – suggesting and provoking not only the tragic distortions in the Congo's subsequent history but also the echoing answers in African writing that reuse Conrad's journey motif as a topos to present the discoveries and recognitions of postcolonial dynamics, a great part of them the deliberate antithesis of Conrad's work.²⁶

Said, unlike Achebe, attempts to move beyond the 'sheer stifling horror' found in Conrad's work and search for a strong sense of clarity, relief, resolution or denial. It is

²³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 92.

²⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 92.

²⁵ Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), 23-24.

²⁶ Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 24.

the tension inherent in Conrad between 'what is intolerably there' and the 'symmetrical compulsion to escape from it' that must be central to any understanding of his writing. Indeed, Said concludes, this is ultimately what reading and interpreting a work like *Heart of Darkness* must really be about.²⁷

Although Said is concerned to distance himself here from Achebe's more polemical and unequivocal reading of Conrad, it would seem that Achebe's acerbic analysis of Conrad did nevertheless have a real effect on Said's subsequent work on the connections between modernism and imperialism. There is certainly a shift of tone and emphasis from *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* to Said's later writings on Conrad: the later writings tend to insist on the limitations of Conrad's liberalism to a much greater extent than the monograph had done. While the later works stress the fact that Conrad was critical of the rapacity and hypocrisies of imperialism, they also stress the fact that Conrad always tends to see the victims of colonialism, in a typically imperialist manner, as primitive and barbarous and without proper agency. But if Said's later work concedes in certain ways to Achebe, it also goes on to explore in new ways the associations between the nineteenth-century European realist novel and the geographical expansion of British imperialism and colonialism. The realist literary tradition, he argues, assisted in the legitimation and consolidation of empire through a discourse that constructed the Orient as the colonisable, Western-consolidating 'Other'. But it is only more recently that similar connections have been established between western modernism and expansionist politics, in part because modernism has been canonised as a mode of literature that flaunted its aesthetic autonomy and that was thus disconnected from politics and history.

²⁷ Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 26.

Said has acknowledged that writing about modernism poses its own difficulties because modernism is a very individualised form of writing. Thus, he remarks, ‘in writing about modernism . . . I think of myself as a historian, where what you’re trying to do is to put the work of art in a larger perspective and connect it to things that are normally not connected to it’.²⁸ We can see this perspective in operation in two critical texts, *Beginnings* (1975) and in ‘A Note on Modernism’ in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).²⁹ It is in *Beginnings* that Said first addresses explicitly the question of modernism, locating the emergence of high modernism within a series of historico-textual factors. Focusing on the work of Conrad in particular, but also Eliot, Hopkins and Proust, he argues that these high modernist texts ‘register, articulate and dramatise, rather than synthesize or resolve’ the dilemmas of the modern world. Said’s focus is the text itself, arguing that the difficulty that must be confronted in any study of modernism is the extent to which modernist writers ‘aspire towards a highly specialised ideal of textual achievement as the *beginning* condition of their work’.³⁰ Said advances his primary thesis on modernism in chapter four of *Beginnings*, arguing that the full range of modernist dilemmas – psychological, logico-epistemological, and historico-sociological – are addressed in the context of a textualist interpretation of modernism:

Whatever work is in fact produced suffers from radical uncertainty at the beginning; it is highly unconventional; it possesses its own inner dynamic; it is a constantly experienced but strangely impalpable whole partially revealing itself in individual works; it is haunted by antecedence, difference, sameness, and the future; and it never finally accomplishes its ideal aims, at least in its

²⁸ Edward Said, ‘Interview with Nouri Jarrah’, *Al Jadid*, Los Angeles, 1999. Reprinted in Gauri Viswanathan, ed. *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 421.

²⁹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta, 1985). First published by Basic Books, New York in 1975. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage 1994). First published by Knopf, New York in 1993.

³⁰ Said, *Beginnings*, 195.

author's opinion. The writer's life, his career, and his text form a system of relationships whose configuration in real human time become progressively stronger (i.e. more distinct, more individualised and exacerbated). In fact, these relationships gradually become the writer's all-encompassing subject. On a pragmatic level, then, his text is his statement of the temporal course of his career, inscribed in language, and shot through and through with precisely these matters.³¹

Modernist writers are unique, Said argues, because they possessed a particularly exacting sense of what constitutes a literary text. The text exists within itself and extends into all parts of the created world where it is both complex and performative. Because of the idealisation of the text in modernism, writing is no longer a vocational quest; instead it becomes an all-consuming 'career' where the text serves as a sign of the author.³² The modernist writer is forced to come to terms with the painful reality that complete autonomy cannot be realised without the endurance of exile. Modernism is thus defined in terms of having beginnings rather than origins.³³

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said returns to further interrogate the complex relationship between modernism and imperialism, arguing that what we call European modernism is in fact a crisis of the imperial world:

One has a sense that in the horizon of [modernist] works there is some disturbance at the peripheries which is having an effect, like the plague in *Death in Venice* which comes from the East, and becomes a metaphor for the change in Europe such that it can no longer exist on its own. Therefore, what

³¹ Said, *Beginnings*, 226-7.

³² See Hussein, *Edward Said*, 113f.

³³ Said barely refers to empire in either *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* or *Beginnings*. Equally, he does not refer to modernism, as such, in *Orientalism*. See Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), 16-25.

the writer does is to reconstruct it . . . It is a break with tradition, but an attempt, sometimes a desperate attempt . . . to rebuild.³⁴

Culture and Imperialism can be understood, in many ways, to be a sequel to *Orientalism* (1978), which offers a uncompromising indictment of the European invention of the 'Oriental Other'. In *Culture and Imperialism* the thesis of *Orientalism* is globalised. Said contends, although little evidence is cited to support this massive claim, that eurocentricism 'penetrated to the core of the workers movements, the women's movement, and the avant-garde arts movement, leaving no one of significance untouched'.³⁵ Imperialism, he contends, involved much more than economic accumulation and territorial acquisition. It was facilitated, sustained, and even impelled by the cultural affliction of eurocentricism:

of the Western views of the Third World which one finds in the work of novelists as different as Graham Greene, V.S. Naipaul, and Robert Stone, of theoreticians of imperialism like Hannah Arendt, and of travel writers, film makers, and polemicists whose specialty is to deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgement or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences.³⁶

³⁴ Edward Said, 'Interview with Jonathan Rée', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, The American University in Cairo, 1993. Reprinted in *Power, Politics and Culture*, 258-59.

³⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 227. Unlike *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism* did not receive the same critical acclaim and conservative critics were particularly caustic in their condemnation. The Marxist critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o was deeply critical of Said's analysis of empire in Jane Austen's writing. He criticised what he termed the 'relentlessly turgid jargon' of the text and argued that Said's 'polemic has precious little to do with the relationship of culture to imperialism'. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Novels of Empire: Guilt and Misery', *The Economist* 27 February 1993, 95. In a lead article in *The Times Literary Supplement*, the anthropologist Ernest Gellner caricatured and dismissed Said's thesis as 'the bogey of orientalism'. See Ernest Gellner, 'The Mightier Pen? Edward Said and the Double Standards of Inside-out Colonialism', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19 February 1993, 3-4. For Said's response and other commentaries on the debate see *The Times Literary Supplement* 19 March 1993, 15 and 2 April 1993, 17.

³⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xix.

Said explicitly argues that 'partly because of empire all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinary differentiated, and unmonolithic'.³⁷ He takes to task

most histories of European aesthetic modernism [which] leave out the massive infusions of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland during the early years of [the twentieth] century, despite the patently important influence they had on modernist artists like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Matisse, and on the very fabric of a society that largely believed itself to be homogeneously white and Western.³⁸

Said's thesis in *Culture and Imperialism*, as stated in his introduction, is to depict not only the expansion and extractions of Western imperialism, but also the response and resistance against it in the colonial world which culminated in decolonisation. He argues that 'these two factors – a general world-wide pattern of imperial culture, and a historical experience of resistance against empire – inform this book in ways that make it not just a sequel to *Orientalism* but an attempt to do something else.'³⁹ Said seeks to offer a 'contrapuntal reading' which acknowledges both imperialism and the resistance to it.⁴⁰ Thus, he argues, each text or cultural artefact can only be understood in terms of the negative 'other' against which it defines itself and the responses of that 'other'.

Said contends that the narrative representation of empire is a significant link between the classical realist novel and the tortured modernist consciousness. He argues that the central theme of the nineteenth-century realist novel was disenchantment or, what Lukács terms, 'ironic disillusion'. Characters are forced by the novel's action to confront the discrepancy between their illusory expectations and their actual social

³⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxix.

³⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 292.

³⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.

⁴⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 59.

realities. For much of the nineteenth century the British realist novel did not give central attention to empire. The reasons for this discrepancy are twofold. Firstly, British cultural confidence was such that empire was simply taken for granted. But, Said reminds us, empire remains there in the background, as in *Jane Eyre*, *Mansfield Park* and *Great Expectations*, but it exists almost as a political unconscious. Secondly, as the opportunities for class mobility receded over the course of the nineteenth century, a fiction of increasing disillusionment emerged and the outposts of empire became the place where dreams that could not be realised at home could be achieved as in the imperial adventure novel and the fiction of Rudyard Kipling.

But, whereas realism collaborated with the ideas, processes and consolidation of empire, the modernist approach is more uncertain, even registering the disillusionment and uncertainty with empire that was seeping into European society at the beginning of the twentieth century. When reading nineteenth-century realists, the reader forms the unmistakable sense that the European imperialist is in total control and that the troublesome native can be permanently subdued. Modernist writing, on the other hand, is suffused with a sense of uncertainty and irony. Said argues that 'Conrad, Forster, Malraux, T. E. Lawrence take narrative from the triumphalist experience of imperialism into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality and corrosive irony, whose formal patterns we have come to recognise as the hallmarks of modernist culture.'⁴¹ For Said, it was Conrad who 'more than anyone else . . . tackled the subtle cultural reinforcements and manifestations of empire'. He both reproduced 'the aggressive contours of high imperialist undertaking' that was characteristic of classic

⁴¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 227.

nineteenth century realism' and simultaneously expressed the 'ironic awareness' that was characteristic of modernism.⁴²

Said also contends that many of the key characteristics of modernism, which have tended to be understood as deriving primarily from the internal dynamics of Western metropolitan culture, are in fact responses 'to the external pressures on culture from the *imperium*'.⁴³ While this is certainly true for Conrad, Said concludes, it is equally true for Irish writers such as Joyce and Yeats, and for American expatriates like Eliot and Pound. Said goes on to suggest that when European culture finally began to take account of imperialism it did so ironically rather than oppositionally, in a desperate attempt to create a sense of inclusiveness. He writes:

It was as if having for centuries comprehended empire as a fact of national destiny to be either taken for granted or celebrated, consolidated, and enhanced, members of the dominant European cultures now began to look abroad with the scepticism and confusion of people surprised, perhaps even shocked by what they saw. Cultural texts imported the foreign into Europe in ways that very clearly bear the mark of the imperial enterprise, of explorers and ethnographers, geologists and geographers, merchants and soldiers.⁴⁴

Initially, Said argues, these cultural texts stimulated European audiences but by the end of the nineteenth century they began to reflect in an ironic manner the vulnerability of empire. The creation of a 'new encyclopaedic form' was necessary to respond to this sense of crisis. In other words, modernist writing recognises that the fates of the European imperialists and the indigenous peoples are intimately connected in often tragic, ironic and humorous ways: 'the hallmark of the modernist form is the strange juxtaposition of comic and tragic, high and low, commonplace and exotic, familiar and

⁴² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 227

⁴³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 227. [Said's emphasis]

⁴⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 229.

alien whose ingenious resolution is Joyce's fusion of the *Odyssey* with the wandering Jew, advertising and Virgil (or Dante), perfect symmetry and the salesman's catalogue'.⁴⁵

One could argue here, of course, that if the question of empire begins to become more central to discussions of modernism in this period it did so not thanks to the critics of the Anglo-American left, but to those of the colonial peripheries. After all, the decisive interventions discussed here stem from a Nigerian writer, Achebe, and from a Palestinian critic, Said, neither of whom were orthodox Marxists in any sense. Later, the impetus to correct modernism and imperialism would receive a further injection from the Field Day enterprise, a Northern Irish intellectual project working within a situation described by some of its members, at least, as late colonial in context. It is possible, therefore, to conclude that the original drive to connect modernism and imperialism stems from outside, rather than from within the Anglo-American left.

There is certainly a strong element of truth to this thesis and the contributions stemming from places such as Nigeria, Palestine and Northern Ireland should certainly be acknowledged. But to view the situation exclusively in this manner would be to oversimplify matters. After all, Achebe and Said were not just a Nigerian and a Palestinian; they were both critics, outsiders in one sense but also major 'stars' within the American university system. Likewise the Field Day enterprise may have been based in Dublin and Derry, but Field Day issued its invites to major luminaries from the Anglo-American cultural left. The intellectual traffic here, in other words, is not all in the one direction, it is moving in two directions, from periphery to centre and back again. It makes more sense therefore to see these early attempts to correct modernism and empire as a series

⁴⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 228.

of tentative exchanges and negotiations conducted between several centres, but exchanges to which figures like, Eagleton and Jameson were always interested interlocutors. In the next section we will examine Fredric Jameson's take up of this issue.

2.3 Fredric Jameson

The Political Unconscious is widely considered to be Fredric Jameson's most important theoretical synthesis. Undertaking a systematic inventory of the history of prose fiction, Jameson attempts to establish Marxist literary criticism as the most all-inclusive and comprehensive theoretical framework as he incorporates a disparate set of competing approaches into his model. His overview of the history of the development of modern literary forms concludes with his attempt to develop a 'double hermeneutic' of ideology and utopia – critiquing ideology while preserving a sense of utopia – as the properly Marxian method of interpretation. Employing a Lukácsian-inspired historical narrative, Jameson attempts to explain how cultural texts contain a 'political unconscious' – by which he means buried narratives and social experiences – which require complex literary hermeneutics in order to be deciphered. One particular narrative that *The Political Unconscious* is concerned with examining is what Jameson terms 'the construction of the bourgeois subject in emergent capitalism and its schizophrenic disintegration in our own time'.⁴⁶ The work of Joseph Conrad is central to Jameson's exploration of the disintegration of the bourgeois subjectivity and he devotes an entire section of *The Political Unconscious* to a close study of Conrad's style. Indeed, Jameson's political reading of Conrad proves to be the pivotal test case for his attempt to

⁴⁶ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 9.

pursue a resolution to the 'uneasy struggle for priority between models and history, between theoretical speculation and textual analysis'.⁴⁷

Lukács's concept of reification is central to Jameson's understanding of Conrad, although he does not adopt the concept uncritically. He acknowledges the necessity of placing 'some distance between our own use of the concept and that to be found in Lukács's various later accounts of modernism, in which the term reification is simple shorthand for value judgement and for the repudiation by association of the various modern styles'. Instead, Jameson argues, that while Lukács was correct in connecting modernism with 'the reification of daily life', he was mistaken to have done so 'ahistorically and to have made his analysis the occasion for an ethical judgement rather than a historical perception'.⁴⁸ *The Political Unconscious* is Jameson's attempt to reformulate Lukács's theory of realism in ways that avoid the latter's valorisation of that literary mode. He postpones the moment of bourgeois crisis, which Lukács associated in *The Historical Novel* and *Studies in Realism* with 1848, to a later date. He argues that realism is different from comedy or tragedy in that it makes a 'claim to cognitive as well as aesthetic status'.⁴⁹ Here, Terry Collits suggests, Jameson's project transcends Lukács's.⁵⁰ While Jameson accepts the demands of Lukács's totality, he warns that 'in practice, an over-emphasis on its cognitive function often leads to a naïve denial of the necessarily fictive character of artistic discourse, or even to iconoclastic calls for an "end of art" in the name of political militancy'.⁵¹ However, at the same time, Jameson is careful to note Lukács's ability to walk the 'tightrope' between the truth value of realism

⁴⁷ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 13.

⁴⁸ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 226, 227.

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'Afterword', *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ronald Taylor, ed., (London: Verso 1980), 198.

⁵⁰ Collits, 'Imperialism, Marxism, Conrad: A Political Reading of *Victory*', *Textual Practice*, No. 3 (Summer 1989), 306.

⁵¹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 13.

and its aesthetic dimension.

For Jameson, Conrad's writing represents 'a strategic fault line in the emergence of contemporary narrative, a place from which the structure of twentieth-century literary and cultural *institutions* becomes visible as it could not be in the heterogeneity of Balzacian registers'.⁵² It is in Conrad's writing that contemporary novelistic modernism begins to emerge. However, modernism at this juncture is still 'tangibly juxtaposed' with what he terms 'the commercialized cultural discourse . . . of late capitalism'.⁵³ It is interesting that when Jameson comes to consider Conrad in the final chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, he does not begin with *Heart of Darkness*, the Conrad text that most overtly interrogates imperialism and a text that straddles the divide between nineteenth-century Europe's belief in progress and civilisation and the post-First World War crisis of confidence. Rather, he begins with *Lord Jim*, the Conrad novel that has been least subject to political critique, a novel whose very 'strategies of containment', Jameson argues, seek to hide such a content.⁵⁴ In *Lord Jim*, he contends, there is a 'tangible "break" in the narrative', 'a qualitative shift and diminution of narrative intensity' between the search for 'truth' and the more traditional 'linear' narrative or romance paradigm.⁵⁵ What is noteworthy for Jameson, however, is not the shift between the two narrative paradigms, nor the disparity between the two types of narrative organisation in the novel, but rather the shift between the 'two distinct cultural spaces', high culture and mass culture.⁵⁶ Conrad's work, Jameson suggests, must be understood in terms of a context defined by 'a structural breakdown of the older realisms, from

⁵² Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 206.

⁵³ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 206. [Jameson's emphasis]

⁵⁴ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 207.

⁵⁵ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 207.

⁵⁶ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 207.

which emerges not modernism alone, but rather two literary and cultural structures, dialectically interrelated and necessarily presupposing each other for any adequate analysis'.⁵⁷ For Jameson, *Lord Jim* challenges the value system of the ruling class of the British Empire. There is an internal division in the novel: on the one hand, it appears to offer a Flaubertian parody of Jim's romantic desire to be the classic adventure hero, while, on the other, it concludes by ambiguously allowing Jim to be just that imperial adventure hero. Jameson's intention is to 'restore the whole socially concrete subtext of late nineteenth-century rationalization and reification of which this novel is so powerfully, and on so many different formal levels, the expression and the utopian compensation alike'.⁵⁸ The second half of the novel can therefore be read as a failed attempt to resolve the dilemma exposed in the first half of the novel.

Jameson reads modernism in this light as simultaneously ideological and utopian. Modernism is 'an ideological expression of capitalism, and in particular, of the latter's reification of daily life'. The 'objective preconditions of Conrad's modernism' can be located 'in the increasing fragmentation both of the rationalized external world' and 'the colonised psyche'.⁵⁹ For Jameson, then 'modernism can be seen as a late stage in the bourgeois cultural revolution'. It is the concluding and 'extremely specialized phase of that immense process of superstructural transformation whereby the inhabitants of older social formations are culturally and psychologically retrained for life in the market system'.⁶⁰ Secondly, modernism can be understood as a 'Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism – the place of quality in

⁵⁷ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 207.

⁵⁸ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 236.

⁵⁹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 236.

⁶⁰ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 236.

an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system'.⁶¹ This, Jameson contends, is a unique experience associated with modernism, one which has no historical equivalent in older types of social life.⁶² Therefore, Conrad's stylistic practice can be understood 'as a symbolic act which, seizing on the Real in all of its reified resistance' simultaneously 'projects a unique sensorium of its own, a libidinal resonance', which is probably determined by history, but whose ambiguity can be located in its determination to transcend history.⁶³ Jameson suggests that Conrad personally may have been unaware of his text's engagement with the disorienting effects of capitalism, but his books are not. Rather, 'a reflexivity, a self-consciousness of the nature of this symbolic process, is inscribed in the text itself'.⁶⁴ Jameson sees literature as an institution that works 'to de-conceal social institutions otherwise imperceptible to the naked eye' and thereby '[reveals] the texture of ideology'.⁶⁵

Jameson's Field Day essay 'Modernism and Imperialism' (1988) applies this formal determinism to the rise of empire in the late nineteenth century. He insists upon defining modernism not in terms of its own self-mythologising as a 'turn inward and away from the social materials associated with realism', but as a reaction through stylistic fragmentation to the sociocultural disorientations and crises of subjectivity experienced in modern society.⁶⁶ The crucial historical factor here is that with the rise

⁶¹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 236-7.

⁶² Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 237.

⁶³ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 237.

⁶⁴ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 237.

⁶⁵ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 265.

⁶⁶ Frederic Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Derry, Field Day, 1988) All references will be to this edition. Reprinted in Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 43-68.

of imperialism, Europeans were eventually compelled to recognise that there was a missing dimension to their world, that 'a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, ... outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country'.⁶⁷ Prior to the mid-twentieth century, he argues, the relationship between the European and the colonial subject was not theorised; hence the term "imperialism" was initially used to denote the rivalries between various first-world powers.⁶⁸ So, Europeans did not think about what life was like in the colonies, and could not have done so because its 'radical otherness' made that life 'literally unimaginable'. In 'Modernism and Imperialism' Jameson argues that narrative constitutes a kind of thinking through of this paradox, and that early twentieth-century artists are uniquely sensitive to the types of disjunctions and disorientations he has been describing here – 'it is only that new kind of art which reflexively perceives this problem and lives this formal dilemma that can be called modernist'.⁶⁹

Jameson's starting point is similar to that of Terry Eagleton in 'The End of English', in that he makes a distinction between the modernism of metropolitan writers such as Foster and Woolf and the modernism of writers from the colonial 'periphery' such as Joyce. Jameson does not simply argue that imperialism produced a specific literature (Kipling, Rider Haggard, Verne, Wells) and left tangible marks on the content

⁶⁷ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 11.

⁶⁸ Here, Jameson is drawing on the classical Marxist definition of imperialism as outlined by Lenin. See V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow: Progress, 1983). Lenin's definition of imperialism was historically specific. For Lenin, imperialism was distinct because it represented – and was the product of – a new stage in the development of capitalism: 'If it was necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism, we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism'(84).

⁶⁹ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 12.

of other 'metropolitan' literary works of the period.⁷⁰ Rather, he contends that the structure of imperialism leaves a fingerprint on the inner forms and structures of modernism as a whole.⁷¹ For Jameson, imperialism impresses itself not only on the content and themes of modernist writing but on its very style. Using the classical Marxist concept of base and superstructure, Jameson argues that after the Congress of Berlin in 1884, the 'First World' subject began to feel him/herself to be part of a tentatively global social and economic system. The mundane existential experience of the metropolis, he writes:

can no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself. As artistic content, it will now henceforth always have something missing about it, but in the sense of privation that can never be restored or made whole simply by adding back in the missing component; its lack is rather comparable to another dimension, an outside like the other face of a mirror, which it constitutively lacks, and which can never be made up or made good.⁷²

The main example that Jameson offers of a literary enactment of this predicament is E.M. Forster's novel *Howard's End*, which he himself admits to being a surprising choice, given Forster's status as a 'closet modernist'. Foster struggles to adhere to realist conventions and *Howard's End* is saturated with modernist or proto-modernist ruptures; these Jameson takes to be symptoms of a liberal humanism anxiously aware of the volatile foundations on which it rests. For Jameson then, what is significant is imperialism's impact on the structures of modernism, resulting particularly in the

⁷⁰ In 'Modernism and Imperialism', Jameson argues that the word 'metropolis' will designate the imperial state as such, while the word 'metropolitan' applies to the internal national realities and daily realities, which are not exclusively urban but are organised around some central urban 'metropolis' in the narrow sense.

⁷¹ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 6.

⁷² Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 12.

'spatialising' of form, which is, among other things, an attempt on the part of the text to resolve the task of 'mapping the totality':

But since representation, and cognitive mapping as such, is governed by the 'intention towards totality', those limits must also be drawn back into the system, which marks them by an image, the image of the Great North Road as infinity: a new spatial language, therefore – modernist 'style' – now becomes the marker and the substitute (the 'tenant-lieu', or place-holding, in Lacanian language) of the unrepresentable totality.⁷³

What this means is that empire rarely appears in the content of modernist works. In modernism generally, he argues, the colonised 'other' is only represented by its absence because the nature of imperialism places limits on modernism's cognitive and representational scope. He concludes by arguing that Ireland's unique status as a site directly adjacent to the imperial core, while still remaining a colony, afforded Irish writers the opportunity to deploy modernist forms while at the same time critically interrogating issues of empire.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) represents for Jameson an exceptional modernist text for this reason. In other parts of the Empire, 'the colonial subject will be unable to register the peculiar transformations of the First World or metropolitan life which will accompany the imperial relationship. Nor will it, from the point of view of the colonised, be of any interest to register those new realities, which are the private concern of the masters, and which a colonised culture must simply refuse and repudiate.'⁷⁴ Here Jameson is distinguishing between the modernism of the 'metropolitan' writers and the modernism of Joyce as a colonised Irish writer. The colonised space from which Joyce

⁷³ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 18.

⁷⁴ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 19.

writes leads him to transform the modernist formal project, even though his work still retains 'a distant family likeness to its imperial variants'.⁷⁵

Jameson argues that in *Ulysses* space does not have to be 'made symbolic' in order to gain a sense of meaning or closure; its closure is objective, gifted by the colonial situation itself.⁷⁶ He writes:

In Joyce, the encounter is at one with Dublin itself, whose compact size anachronistically permits the now archaic life of the older-city state. It is therefore unnecessary to generate an aesthetic form of closure distinct from the city, which in First World modernism must be imposed by the violence of form upon this last as compensation.⁷⁷

Jameson's short conclusion to his thesis argues that remnants of empire can be detected in Western modernism and are in fact constitutive of it. But, he concludes, 'we must not look for them in obvious places, in content or in representation'. With the exception of the special case of Irish literature, and of Joyce, 'they will be detected spatially, as formal symptoms within the structure of the First World modernist texts themselves'.⁷⁸

While Jameson makes a number of extravagant claims in 'Modernism and Imperialism', that, as we will see, are problematic, the essay was at least a bold attempt explicitly to connect modernism and imperialism. He advances an important examination of the relationship between the destabilisation of language and form within modernism and the geographical expansion and materialist contradictions of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism. Sometimes, however, the distinctions that he creates are too rigid and absolute. Jameson argues that a self-conscious European imperialism is largely a post-First World War phenomenon and that prior to this

⁷⁵ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 20.

⁷⁶ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 21-22.

⁷⁷ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 20.

⁷⁸ Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', 23.

imperialism was conceived of essentially in terms of the relationship between the European powers themselves. He creates a clear distinction between the explicit literature of imperialism and the opaque modernist texts whose structure and inner forms are distinguished by it, arguing that empire hardly ever appears explicitly in the content of modernism. However, the literature that Jameson sees as engaging specifically with colonialism – Kipling, Rider Haggard, Verne and Wells – is not in any formalist sense considered to be modernist, while discussions of notable French and English modernist writers who do deal with colonial landscapes - André Gide's *The Immoralist*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and D.H. Lawrence in works such as *Kangaroo* or *The Plumed Serpent* – are ignored. Jameson, in other words, advances a very broad thesis about modernism on a very slender textual basis, and many of his readers have felt that the selection of *Howard's End* and *Ulysses* as his exemplary 'proof' are not only arbitrary but cavalierly so. His thesis, that is to say, might be more persuasive were it advanced on a stronger and more inclusive evidentiary basis.

The other difficulty with 'Modernism and Imperialism' lies in Jameson's argument about Ireland's relationship to modernism and empire. This relationship is more problematic and complicated than he allows for in this article. His insistence on the unique position of Ireland and Irish modernist writers, such as Joyce, tends to ignore those other colonies that had a thriving metropolitan centre and the other colonised writers who had experiences of metropolitan life. Jameson asserts the unique status of Ireland as a European colony in close proximity to the centres of advanced capitalism and argues for the unique status of Irish modernism owing to this circumstance. But, the question remains, was the flowering of Irish literary modernism in the early twentieth century attributable exclusively, or even mainly, to Ireland's geographical proximity to

England or to England's advanced industrial capitalism? Would Jameson not be on stronger ground, especially as a Marxist, if he argued that Irish modernism was enabled not just by Ireland's unique geographical position close to the heart of Empire, but also to the fact that its modernism emerges in the context of the Irish National Revolution that extended from 1916 to the 1930s? In other words, if Ireland produced a rich literary modernism before the other colonies did, was this not attributable, in part at least, to the fact that in Ireland the era of high modernism coincided with the revolutionary stage of Irish nationalism – a nationalism more advanced and more militant in the early twentieth century than the nationalisms of India, Africa or Australia? Were Jameson to connect Irish modernism not just to Ireland's unique geography but also to the particular moment of its national revolution he might have produced a more rounded and a more richly suggestive thesis. Were he to relate Irish modernism to the Irish revolution, he might also be better able to account for the different varieties of Irish modernism represented by Yeats, Beckett and others as well as Joyce. As it is, however, he singles out Joyce for exclusive attention, and ignores all other version of Irish literary modernism.

Jameson's attempt to connect modernism and empire via Joyce is brilliantly suggestive, then, but his pamphlet works better as a series of provocations rather than as a carefully modulated argument. In the next section we will explore how Terry Eagleton takes up the issue of modernism and imperialism and develops it again in new directions

2.4 Terry Eagleton

The question of modernism and imperialism has been less central to Eagleton's work than to either Jameson's or Said's. It was not until his 1987 essay 'The End of English'

that Eagleton directly confronted the question of empire, returning to a theme he first addressed almost two decades earlier in *Exiles and Émigrés*.⁷⁹ In the later work, he once again intertwines questions of Englishness, modernism and colonialism but pursues the arguments to include the issues of the present, addressing questions of post-colonialism and postmodernism. The essay begins in a similar manner to *Exiles and Émigrés* by arguing that modernist writers such as James, Conrad, Pound and Eliot are best regarded as émigrés for whom the English literary tradition is an object to be reconstructed rather than preserved. These authors, writes Eagleton, 'could approach native English traditions from the outside, objectify and appropriate them for their own devious ends, estrange and inhabit English culture in a single act, as those reared within its settled pieties could not'.⁸⁰ Their position outside of English culture allowed them to view its literary traditions less as a legacy to be honoured, and more as 'an object to be problematised'. Modernism, thus understood, intonates its own preoccupations in 'the tongue of another', and reveals itself to be 'inside and outside a hegemonic discourse' and 'the parasite which . . . merges into the very image of the host'.⁸¹

On this occasion, however, Ireland is key to Eagleton's analysis. He argues that Irish colonial dispossession generates an art that revels in parody and subversive technique. As a result, Ireland produced some of the key figures in the Anglophone literary modernist canon: Yeats in the field of poetry, Joyce in fiction, and Beckett in the world of theatre. Irish writers, unlike their English counterparts, were free to experiment in literary parody and subversion because the experience of colonialism had divested

⁷⁹ First published as 'The End of English', *Textual Practice*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1987), 1-9. Reprinted in *Central Institute of English and Foreign Language Bulletin* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1987) 1-10 and *The Eagleton Reader*, edited by Stephen Regan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 270-278. [All citations are from the latter edition.]

⁸⁰ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 270.

⁸¹ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 270.

them of their own native culture, producing a crisis of national identity in what Eagleton terms 'a familiarly modernist way'.⁸² By this he means that in Ireland everything had to be invented anew as the vestiges of national culture, and in particular language and identity, had all been destroyed through the processes of coercive Anglicisation that had accompanied colonialism.

Secondly, Eagleton focuses on what happens to the 'national cultural formation' of what is known as 'English literature' when it encounters the events of the early twentieth century. 'English literature' was the product of the Victorian imperial middle classes who were eager to express their spiritual identity via a distinct body of literature. Three structurally interrelated phenomena undermined the stability of this version of nineteenth-century Victorian cultural unity: the First World War, the emergence of modernism, and changes in the capitalist mode of production.⁸³ The most immediate of these three currents was the violence and frenzy of the First World War, which highlighted the intensity and futility of national identities, and at the same time attempted to reinvent them as a sanctuary from ideological devastation. According to Eagleton, one indication of how this happened can be found in the contradictory responses to the events of the early twentieth century in the work of F. R. Leavis and the *Scrutiny*-associated intellectuals, who found themselves caught between a zealous campaigning on behalf of modern culture and a reactionary return to an idealised version of the English past:

Caught precariously between imperialist hegemony and modernist revolt, English criticism was forced to counter the rebarbative realities of late capitalist culture with an earlier phase of bourgeois ideology: that of liberal

⁸² Eagleton, 'The End of English', 271.

⁸³ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 271.

humanism already in process of being historically superseded, on the defensive even in Matthew Arnold's day, a residual trace from a more buoyant, sanguine myth of bourgeois man. *Scrutiny* shared with modernism a certain marginal location, a resistance to the dominant metropolitan culture.⁸⁴

Hence, the ideology of 'Englishness' survives, to some degree, only by defusing and domesticating modernism, as instanced for example by the 'Anglician' tone and sensibility of the later T. S. Eliot. In this context, Eagleton points out, there is a type of 'collusion' between modernism and capitalism. Modernism's eschewal of national formations, its remaking and fusion of many different literary traditions, was made possible by the 'nation-blindness' of modern capitalism. However, the relationship between capitalism and national culture is inherently contradictory because it demands the exploitation of the very national allegiances and identities which its economic system undermines:

In this sense one can appreciate just what a desperate wager modernism must seem from a native non-conformist viewpoint: in seeking to challenge the oppressiveness of bourgeois nationhood, it must surrender itself inexorably to the rhythms of monopoly-capitalist internationalism, beginning, as Brecht said, from the 'bad new things' rather than the good old ones, permitting history to progress (as Marx said) by its bad side . . . For Leavis, there was a choice between being at home in your own language and being exiled in another's.⁸⁵

The effects of centuries of British colonialism in Ireland meant that this opportunity was not available to writers such as Joyce and Beckett, who, Eagleton writes, 'might as well be homeless in all languages as dispossessed in one's own'.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 272.

⁸⁵ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 273.

⁸⁶ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 273.

Following on from his arguments in *Exiles and Émigrés*, Eagleton argues that the literary émigrés, James, Conrad and Eliot, who were attracted to the shores of England, did so precisely because of the settled nature of its society, but it was this very stability that made English society resistant to modernism and which inspired writers like Joyce to react against it. Eagleton describes England as being 'closed' to modernism, content to import it from its peripheries. This represented, on the one hand, an attempt to banish subversive cultural forms, but, on the other hand, it illustrated the capitalist stagnation that was afflicting England and on which the 'backward' ideology of 'Englishness' flourished:

Empire was England's secret weapon against a promiscuous modernism: the mere fact of the global reach of the English language was enough to buttress an indigenous culture otherwise grievously threatened with decline. Englishness thus survived the modernist onslaught . . . but it then had to confront the much graver threat of the loss of empire itself.⁸⁷

'Empire' in this conception is more than a political and economic institution; it is also something that provides an ideology of 'Englishness'. Eagleton cites the example of *A Passage to India*, written in the enclave of English studies at Cambridge in the 1920s. Foster's novel 'presages' the loss of empire, it marks 'the limits of realist and liberal empiricist discourse', but it is unable to transcend them. With the collapse of British imperial hegemony, 'English' begins to lose 'its global guarantee' and its liberal humanist supporters are faced with an identity crisis. Liberalism is uncomfortable with ruling-class imperial arrogance but its belief in the centrality of English national culture was nonetheless supported and enforced by imperialism. English liberals, that is to say, were sometimes critical of imperialism, but it was nonetheless the global reach of

⁸⁷ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 273.

English, which rested on empire, that made English culture at once a securely national and yet also a 'universal' culture. Therefore, Eagleton concludes, the demise of liberal humanism and the collapse of empire are 'historically coincident'.⁸⁸

Eagleton also notes the 'curious parallelisms' that exist between colonialism and late-capitalism.⁸⁹ With the development of late-capitalism, the seemingly stable antithesis between the colonial margin and metropolitan centre is gradually eroded. As capitalism develops it is forced to yield ground to consumerism and the whole of society is forced to endure, what Eagleton terms, 'the spiritual depletion and disinheritance previously reserved, with particular violence' for the colonies.⁹⁰ This breakdown becomes the determining factor in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. What had once been displaced onto the margins returns now to haunt the centre. Like Frederic Jameson, who argues that postmodernism is 'the cultural logic of late capitalism', Eagleton too locates the emergence of postmodernism in the late phase of global consumer capitalism. In 'Modernism, Myth and Monopoly Capitalism' (1989), he argues that the modernism that preceded late-capitalism was driven by a dynamic phase of capitalist technology, of which futurism and constructivism were the logical cultural forms. That modernism is a movement that cuts 'indifferently across cities, societies, art-forms, languages, national traditions' and it belongs to 'the new rootless semiotic networks of monopoly capitalist Europe, floating in and out of Berlin, Paris, Zurich, Vienna as easily as the pound'.⁹¹ This cosmopolitan sweep has a genuinely progressive force, but like international capitalism it can also manifest itself as blind indifference to

⁸⁸ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 274, 275.

⁸⁹ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 275.

⁹⁰ Eagleton, 'The End of English', 275.

⁹¹ Terry Eagleton, 'Modernism, Myth and Monopoly Capitalism', *News from Nowhere*, 7 (1989), 9-24. Reprinted in *The Eagleton Reader*, 279-284.

particular places and times. This deep ambivalence within modernism is evident in works by those writers who are simultaneously bohemian exiles and confirmed elitists. Literary criticism then confronts the problem of an intellectual current that is both culturally avant-garde and political reactionary.

What is important about Eagleton's 'The End of English' essay is that it develops his original thesis in *Exile and Émigrés*, as outlined in Chapter One, arguing that not only was English modernism a product of 'outsiders' who existed on the margins of 'English' culture, but, that its emergence was also related to the presence of empire. English culture may have attempted to resist modernism by displacing it to the margins, but it was eventually forced to confront an even more dangerous threat, the collapse of empire itself. The centrality of imperialism to Eagleton's analysis of modernism is a new dimension to his work. This essay was first published in 1987 and suggests that Eagleton begins to emphasise the centrality of empire to modernism under the influence of postcolonial studies, which was emerging as one of the dominant discourses in literary studies in the 1980s.

In *Criticism and Ideology* (1978), published six years after *Exiles and Émigrés*, Eagleton reads Conrad's texts in terms of their ideological conflicts and the demands of the 'moment'. He argues that nineteenth-century imperialism required the production of 'a corporate, messianic, idealist ideology' but that this took place at precisely the moment when mid-Victorian society was experiencing its own sense of crisis: 'faith in progress was being eroded into pessimism, subjectivism and irrationalism'. Imperialism, Eagleton argues 'threw into embarrassing exposure the discrepancy between its Romantic ideals and sordid material practice; it also bred an awareness of cultural relativism at precisely the point where the absolute cultural hegemony of the imperialist

nations needed to be affirmed'.⁹² Eagleton situates Conrad in this contradictory ideological field arguing, as Said does, that Conrad neither believes in the cultural superiority of the imperialist societies, nor rejects imperialism outright. The 'message' of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society – a viewpoint which undermines imperialist assumptions but only by reducing all cultures to a common, generalised barbarism.

Eagleton's more recent *The English Novel* (2005), brings together many of these earlier arguments on Conrad in the context of discussion of the emergence of the English novel. This is not Eagleton's first engagement with Conrad's work, he wrote a short essay *The Secret Agent* for his essay collection *Against the Grain* in 1986.⁹³ However, in this essay, 'Form, Ideology and *The Secret Agent*', considerations of empire are implicit, and only indirectly connected to more general discussions of the relationship between form and ideology.⁹⁴ In *The English Novel* however, Eagleton unequivocally argues that Conrad's ideology is that of the exile whose sense of identity has been 'undermined early on by the burden of imperial autocracy', and whose experiences have been determined by the 'profound historical crisis' that was emerging in the early twentieth century.⁹⁵ In terms of literary form, this was reflected in the conflict between romance and realism. For Eagleton, imperialism is 'a form of Romantic idealism', that is characterised by a nationalist rhetoric of God and country and a transformative vision of

⁹² Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), 134-5.

⁹³ Terry Eagleton, 'Form, Ideology and *The Secret Agent*', *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-85* (London: Verso, 1986), 23-32.

⁹⁴ It is not until the very end of the essay that Eagleton explicitly names imperialism as one of the dominant ideologies that he has been exploring. See Eagleton, 'Form, Ideology and *The Secret Agent*', 30.

⁹⁵ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 235.

the world. It is also, he notes, an idealism 'motivated by a less than godly materialism'.⁹⁶ This is reflected in Conrad's work by a celebration of the ideals of hard work, loyalty and self-sacrifice, and by a negation of the material ends which these virtues ultimately serve, capital. This is not the only contradiction that imperialism generates. Eagleton argues that while imperialism demands absolute conviction in and loyalty to one's own national values, it also brings one into contact with other cultures and values, creating what he terms, 'a disabling cultural relativism':

By Conrad's time, the liberal, humanistic values that had served the West so splendidly in its earlier, more self-assured historical phase are being called into question by Yeats, Freud, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Martin Heidegger and D. H. Lawrence as much as by the ferociously anti-Enlightenment Pole. Reason and progress have been unmasked as a lie, truth and objectivity exposed as delusions, and on all sides there is a return to the mystical and primitive, savage gods and mystical archetypes.⁹⁷

Understood in this context, Conrad's work can be seen to attempt to 'dredge order from chaos', though that attempt will ultimately prove unsuccessful. The strains and stresses of this endeavour disclose themselves not just at the level of content, but also at the level of form. Conrad's writing manages to be, simultaneously, tangible and ambivalent. The typical Conrad tale, writes Eagleton 'is a colourful tale of action and adventure, surrounded by a misty penumbra of elusive meanings'.⁹⁸ This is not because Conrad has ultimate faith in the power of language; like most other modernists he has remarkably little. Conrad himself once remarked, Eagleton reminds us, that every word and meaning floats in a sea of doubts and indeterminacies.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 236.

⁹⁷ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 236.

⁹⁸ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 237.

⁹⁹ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 237.

The world for Conrad is incomprehensible and obscure, resistant to human understanding. Narrative may attempt to impose truth through form but in Conrad's writing it ultimately fails because it is attempting to reveal a truth that is unwilling to yield. Similarly, imperialism is also rejected by Conrad because it attempts to impose order on what is essentially a formless world. As a result, Eagleton concludes, there is 'a kind of absent centre' in Conrad's writing, a 'core silence' which rejects representation:

Conrad's texts, then, work by virtue of an absence. It is silence which stirs them into eloquence, a haziness which impels them to be specific, something unrepresentable at their heart which drives their language and narrative so energetically onwards. But this unrepresentable thing at their centre is also nothing less than the human subject. For the human subject is defined by its freedom . . . [Yet] the world is not really designed for human consciousness, and certainly not for freedom. Men and women are not agents of their own destinies. So how are novels to represent moments of transformation, vital decisions and revolutionary events? The answer is that they simply do not, and cannot. In a mechanistic world, freedom must remain a mystery.¹⁰⁰

We discover this resonating silence in many of Conrad's texts whether it is the unfathomable riddle of Kurtz, Jim and Nostromo, the brooding passivity of James Wait in *The Nigger of Narcissus*, the stolid opacity of McWhirr in *Typhoon*, the eternal enigma of the "Russian soul" in *Under Western Eyes*, or the mystical silence of the idiot Stevie in *The Secret Agent*.¹⁰¹ In the modernist text the antinomies of the imperial project are registered at the level of form, an argument that was first developed in the work of Fredric Jameson.

¹⁰⁰ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 240.

¹⁰¹ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 134. Commenting on Eagleton's analysis of Conrad in *Criticism and Ideology*, Rosemary Marangoly George suggests that Eagleton's list could be extended to include female characters. She argues that 'the resonant silences' in Conrad's novels carry 'the marks of both genders. In Conrad's fiction, silence, darkness, the vacuum or void is the enunciation of the feminized heart not just of the jungle but also of the civilised world.' Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68.

In *Heart of Darkness* imperialism is presented 'not as a purposeful, historically intelligent system, but as a kind of nightmarish aberration.' Eagleton categorises Conrad as 'a right-wing irrationalist' who

believes instead in the realities of egoism, barbarism and eternal conflict, the frailty of reason and the relative unimportance of such mundane matters as prosperity. He also suspects that history, far from progressing, is actually slipping backwards into savagery. So his views give no comfort to imperialism.¹⁰²

This highlights for Eagleton the central difficulties with the depiction of imperialism in Conrad's work. Conrad rejects imperialism not because of its brutality and greed but because it is inspired by enlightened ideas of reason, progress and civilisation, ideas that, Eagleton contends, he actually despised.

2.5 Conclusions

The attempt to conceptualise the relationship between modernism and imperialism in this chapter is also an attempt to assess the history and politics of modernism in a global rather than an exclusively Euro-American context. The efforts to theorise the relationship between the two are sometimes brilliant and ingenious, but they have also remained somewhat fitful and tentative. None of the authors surveyed here, for example, has written an extended monograph on the subject. Jameson has returned to the topic of modernism and empire in a number of essays, but his chapter on Conrad in *The Political Unconscious* remains his most systematic and fully theorised intervention on the issue.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 242-43.

¹⁰³ See, in particular, Jameson's highly controversial essay, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text* No. 15 (Autumn 1986), 65-88. The essay was strongly critiqued by

Said's *Beginnings* develops an impressively accomplished theory of the linguistic and stylistic attributes of modernism but it does not seriously address the issue of empire; his later 'A Note on Modernism' in *Culture and Imperialism* does deal with empire in a suggestive, but, also brief and highly speculative and, indeed, abstract manner. Eagleton, like Jameson, revisits the issue a number of times in his career between *Exiles and Émigrés* and *The English Novel*, but his take on the topic becomes increasingly sinuous and his reading of Conrad in the latter work is essentially an attempt to produce a synthesis of left-wing scholarship on the issue. For the most part, then, the conceptualisation of the connections between modernism and imperialism has remained narrowly clustered around a few authors, primarily Conrad – the key figure for the speculations of all of the theorists discussed here – and later Joyce. The relationship between modernism and imperialism in other non-British contexts, such as France, Austro-Hungary, Spain or Russia, has never emerged as a topic for speculation in these circles. Likewise, the modernisms of the colonies or postcolonies themselves – the modernisms of South America, India or the Caribbean say – have also not been critically considered, even though that topic is breeched at least in the limited case of Ireland.

Aijaz Ahmad, in 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory', *Social Text* 17 (1987), 3-26. Ahmad wrote: 'I have been reading Jameson's work now for roughly fifteen years, and at least some of what I know about the literatures and cultures of Western Europe and the USA come from him; and because I am a Marxist, I have always thought of us, Jameson and myself, as birds of the same feather, even though we have never quite flocked together. But then . . . I realized what was being theorized was, among many other things, myself. Now I was born in India and I write poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among US intellectuals. So I said to myself: "All? . . . necessarily?" It felt odd. Matters became much more curious, however. For the further I read, the more I realized, with no little chagrin, that the man whom I had for so long, so affectionately, albeit from a physical distance, taken as a comrade was, in his own opinion, my civilizational Other. It was not a good feeling'. For an overview of the debate on Jameson within postcolonial theory see Neil Lazarus, 'Frederic Jameson on "Third World Literature": A Qualified Defence' in Sean Homer and Douglas Kellner (eds.) *Frederic Jameson: A Critical Reader* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 42-61 and Michael Sprinker, 'The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson', *Public Culture*, No. 6 (1993), 3-29.

Despite the differences between their various takes on the topic, the works discussed here share a good deal of common ground. With the exception of Achebe's angry but stimulating indictment of Conrad's alleged racism, the other theorists reviewed here attempted to conceptualise the relationship between modernism and imperialism in a dialectical manner that makes allowances for the critical thrust, as well as the more conservative social functions served by modernist literature. For Said, Jameson and Eagleton alike, modernism can only be evaluated by situating it in terms of a much deeper history of European liberalism and realism, and in terms of a longer history of European socioeconomic development and expansionism. *The Political Unconscious, Culture and Imperialism* and *The English Novel* all frame the topic in this way, and in so doing attempt to side-step Achebe's more ethical and denunciatory approach. Moreover, Said, Jameson and Eagleton all agree that the relationship between modernism and imperialism must be adduced in terms of modernist style or form rather than at the level of content – indeed, the determination to make the connections at this level accounts for much of the complexity and interest of their work.

But while the works of Said, Jameson and Eagleton are all quite energetically dialectical in their assessments of modernism, it is clear that the accent of this body of work as a whole falls on the conservative sociohistorical functions performed by modernist fiction. Thus, for Said, modernism is the literary expression of a crisis of European culture brought about by the alterity of empire, the over extensions of imperialism and by the challenges of anti-imperial nationalism. The great modernist writers seek to find strategies to contain rather than to express the sense of crisis that emerges in this period. For Said, the attempt to give a strongly critical intellectual expression to the crisis really only occurs with the emergence of 'Third-World' or

postcolonial writing in the late twentieth-century, or in the moment of African and Asian decolonisation. Likewise, in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson sees Conrad's distinctive narrative forms and his signature style as an attempt to find some sort of imaginary 'resolution' to the wider intellectual crisis that his work both responds to and represses. For Jameson, it is only from a non-metropolitan site such as Ireland that a more strenuously critical modernism can arise. Thus, he seems implicitly to agree with Said that the metropole cannot produce its own radical self-critique, though by reading Joyce as a colonial writer he brings forward that moment of radical critique to the pre-First World War period, whereas Said defers it until the later part of the century in *Culture and Imperialism*. In a more damning verdict, Eagleton's *The English Novel* situates Conrad's fiction in the context of a wider intellectual failure of English (and European) liberalism. Whereas *Exiles and Émigrés* offers a largely positive account of Conrad as part of the formation of exilic writers, in *The English Novel* he stresses 'the ferociously anti-Enlightenment' thrust, which he now views as an essentially reactionary attempt to 'dredge order from chaos.'

These negative verdicts on the wider historical function of modernism may seem a little odd given that – as we see in the upcoming chapters – the Anglo-American left will view the transition from modernism to postmodernism in largely sceptical terms. After all, if modernism serves a largely conservative purpose, why should its passing be mourned by the left? This tension, or downright contradiction even, seems especially true of Eagleton and Jameson, both of whom (as will be seen later in this study) tend to view postmodernism as a much less radical cultural moment than the preceding modernist one, and Eagleton especially writes particularly scathingly about postmodern

intellectuals and postmodern art.¹⁰⁴ Thus, when modernism is evaluated in connection to empire, Eagleton and Jameson seem to stress its conservative dimensions, but when they assess it with reference to postmodernism they tend, on the contrary, to stress its essentially revolutionary character. As we will see over the next two chapters, Jameson and Eagleton, like many of the cultural left, tend to view the passing of modernism, retrospectively at least, with a good deal of nostalgia, and to consider the postmodern moment as a sadly depoliticised conjuncture by comparison. Said is in many ways less at odds with himself on this matter since, when he comes to the later part of the twentieth century, he writes about the achievements of postcolonial writers and intellectuals rather than about postmodernism as such. Even so, nearly all of Said's major critical works deal extensively with the modernists – Hopkins, Yeats, Conrad especially – than they do with contemporary postcolonial writers. Certainly, Said never deals with a late-twentieth century writer in the same meticulous way that he does with Conrad. Hence, his literary enthusiasms bind him to the early twentieth century even if his take on modernism differs somewhat to those developed by Eagleton or Jameson.

In the end, though, it must be acknowledged that, whatever its difficulties, the work on modernism and imperialism surveyed here has proved productive. The Said and Jameson Field Day pamphlets on Yeats and Joyce provoked a great deal of critical responses not only in Ireland but internationally. Eagleton's pamphlet was not as controversial, but Eagleton has gone on to write several books on modern Irish culture, and in so doing he has widened his horizons of interest beyond his former purely metropolitan English or European-North American concerns, as indeed has Jameson in

¹⁰⁴ See Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

later works such as *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992).¹⁰⁵ Today, there is a small but thriving body of critical work that engages specifically with the topic of modernism and empire. Some notable examples include Maria Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (1990), Howard Booth's and John Rigby's edited collection *Modernism and Empire* (2002), Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Cultures in England* (2004), and John Marx's *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (2005).¹⁰⁶ Much of this more recent work is non-Marxist or post-Marxist in character, and in that sense it marks a departure from the left-wing thrust of the scholarship discussed here. But the formative influence of this left-wing scholarship in clearing the intellectual space for this current work and in the widening the geo-historical parameters of the debates on modernism deserves acknowledgement.

¹⁰⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: British Film Institute, 1992).

¹⁰⁶ Maria Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby, *Modernism and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Cultures in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and John Marx, *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

CHAPTER THREE

Whatever Happened to the Avant-Gardes? Marxist Analyses from Greenberg to Bürger and Beyond

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 Introduction

Conventional histories of modernism usually read something like this: In the beginning modernism thrived in a hectic cultural climate quickened by the excitements of technological and political revolution. In the wake of the First World War, the old world of the *ancien régimes* was rapidly breaking down but what would emerge to replace that old order was not yet clear. The modernisms that flourished in this hothouse atmosphere were of two kinds. On the one side, there were the mandarin modernisms of individual geniuses such as Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and others who worked alone to create some of the great modernist masterpieces. On the other side, there were the rebellious avant-garde movements or collectives – the Cubists, Dadaists, Expressionists, Futurists, Constructivists, Surrealists, and many more – that sprang up all over the European continent and that were determined to break down the artistic institutions they had inherited from the nineteenth century and to establish dynamic new relationships between art and public culture.

In the period after the Second World War, however, a combination of Cold War conservatism and the post-war economic boom generated a new climate in which modernism could no longer thrive. Slowly but surely, the growth of mass consumption, the simultaneous development of mass culture, and the expansion of new television and computer media radically altered the entire ecology of cultural production. In this new world, the old mandarin modernisms were assimilated and domesticated, canonised by

the new university curricula or by museums and galleries as the official art of the twentieth century. More or less simultaneously, the collective avant-gardes were also swallowed up by becoming part of the new celebrity culture, or by being absorbed as just another passing sensation in the never-ending media circus of the society of the spectacle. Somewhere between the end of the Second World War and 1989 modernism expired and ceded the world to its postmodernist successor.

Whether or not we find this narrative plausible, there is certainly a relationship of some sort between the perceived decline of the old modernist avant-gardes and the emergence of the debates about postmodernity and postmodernism that would come to dominate the intellectual world from the 1980s onwards. It was, after all, the sense that the modernist avant-gardes were in a state of advanced decline and that art generally was increasingly having to contend with a new and more intensively mediated society and with a powerfully expanded culture industry that gave the whole idea of the postmodern its credence. In short, the decline of the one and the rise of the other seemed to be two sides of the same coin. Yet long before the word 'postmodern' had become common currency in intellectual circles, critics on the left in Europe and America had begun to ponder the fate of the modernist avant-gardes. By the 1950s and 1960s Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School had already begun to speculate about the rise of the culture industries and the waning of modernism's shock effects.¹ In the United States two significant voices on the left, Clement Greenberg and Renato Poggioli, had also begun to

¹ See, in particular, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), first Published in Germany in 1944. See also Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay, 'The Artist as Producer', in Benjamin, *Collected Writings*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). For a selection of essays by Adorno on mass culture, including 'The Schema of Mass Culture' (published posthumously in 1981) and 'Culture Industry Reconsidered' (1975) see Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991).

write about the decline of the avant-gardes or about the relationship between the avant-gardes and mass culture. Greenberg's and Poggioli's studies of the avant-gardes were developed in 1939 and 1962 (translated into English in 1968) respectively; their's are two of the seminal studies on this whole topic. Peter Bürger, a student of Adorno, was to publish his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, perhaps the most definitive contemporary study of the fate of the modernist avant-gardes, in German in 1974 and it was translated into English in 1984, just at that moment when debates about postmodernism were beginning to flourish in the Anglo-American academic world. In this chapter I want to review all three of these studies, and in so doing to track some of the ways in which left-wing thinking about the modernist avant-gardes evolved in the era before the whole terminology of 'the postmodern' had become the standard currency it is today.

The best known of these three figures is the American art critic Clement Greenberg who first presented his theory of the avant-garde in 1939 in a famous article 'Avant-garde and Kitsch,' in which he constructed a series of oppositions between mass culture and the avant-garde.² Greenberg was associated with the Trotskyist left in the United States during the 1930s and was, at least for this period, intellectually committed to producing a Marxist analysis of capitalist society. However, by the early 1940s Greenberg had become seriously disillusioned with socialist politics and his left-wing credentials became seriously compromised following his outspoken comments against the left in Spain and his refusal to speak out against McCarthyism in the 1950s.³ 'Avant-

² Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, Fall (1939). Reprinted in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Second Edition (Routledge: London and New York, 2000), 48-59. All references are to this edition.

³ Greenberg has also been accused of attempting to expose his former colleagues on *The Nation* as Communist sympathisers. On the basis of research at the Archives of American Art in Washington D.C. and the Congressional Record, Annette Cox contends that in 1951 Greenberg struck an alliance with the

Garde and Kitsch' was initially received as a Marxist intervention into the debate concerning the relationship between art and culture, but this conception of his article has been subject to much review, particularly in light of the revelations that the CIA covertly funded artists associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement.⁴ Greenberg's 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' was written during the highpoint of the European avant-garde movement and it is essentially an appeal for the development of an American avant-garde culture.

Renato Poggioli is the least well-known of these three figures. An Italian by birth, Poggioli played an active role within the 1930s anti-fascist Italian left. Like many other Italian anti-fascist *émigrés*, he went into exile in the United States following Mussolini's rise to power. He later became Professor of Comparative Literature and Slavic Studies at Harvard University. Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* was first published in Italian in 1962 and translated six years later into English and published by Harvard University Press. It attempts to offer both a sociological and a psychological explanation for the emergence of avant-gardist phenomena. Poggioli's aim was not to study avant-garde art in itself, but rather to consider what 'avant-garde art reveals about the cultural situation as such'.⁵ His focus was not on the aesthetics or poetics of the avant-garde, but on its mentalities, ethics and politics. In the United States, where

anti-Communist, anti-intellectual Michigan congressman George Dondero and made public charges against several formal editors of *The Nation*. See Annette Cox, *The Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1982), 142.

⁴ Frances Saunders has argued that 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' set out 'a rationale' for accepting funding from 'enlightened patrons' or organisations which would turn out to be associations which operated as fronts for the CIA. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 258-59.

⁵ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Gerald Fitzgerald, trans. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968). The original edition appeared in Italian in 1962, a year before Poggioli's premature death in an car accident. Renato Poggioli, *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1962).

Poggioli lived and taught, the dichotomy between mass culture and high culture had opened up much earlier than in Europe and he therefore seeks in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* to consider the impact of mass culture on avant-garde cultural activity. Poggioli's study is important because it examines the avant-garde within its historical context, linking the avant-garde to early German romanticism and surrealism, and because it anticipates works such as Bürger's that would question the viability of the avant-garde in the new world of the mass consumer society.

Poggioli's and Greenberg's theories of the avant-garde are largely descriptive in character. Poggioli's theory describes the diverse ecology of avant-gardist movements and Greenberg considers the avant-garde in terms of its opposite, kitsch or mass culture. The German literary historian Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* differs from both of these accounts in that it aims to explain the avant-garde in terms of historical and philosophical considerations and this probably remains the most influential account of the avant-garde in literary and cultural studies today.⁶ The volume was translated into English in 1984, and has become the standard reference point for all subsequent discussions of the avant-garde in Anglo-American cultural criticism. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* provoked such extensive discussion in Germany that its publisher Suhrkamp Verlag issued a book of responses that was more than twice the size of Bürger's original text.⁷ Bürger's study is included in this chapter because it has been so influential in the Anglo-American academy and because it represents an interesting intersection between the concerns of the mid-century German left and those of the late

⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1984).

⁷ W. M. Lüdke, ed., *'Theorie der Avant-Garde': Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und Bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976). The collection was not translated into English.

twentieth-century Anglo-American cultural left.⁸ As a theorist writing in the tradition of Adorno, Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School, Bürger takes up issues that had been vigorously debated by the continental left in the 1930s and 1940s and his book has also been a major stimulus for the further elaboration of these issues in the Anglophone-world since the 1980s. Bürger argues in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that in order to create a social history of art and literature it is necessary to understand the connection between an individual work of art and its history, the social status of art in a particular society, and the function and prestige attached to an individual work in society.

Having reviewed the ways in which Greenberg, Poggioli and Bürger have shaped twentieth-century debates on the avant-gardes, the chapter will conclude with a brief analysis of how three notable contemporary leftist theorists – the Americans, Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, and the French intellectual, Pierre Bourdieu – have taken up these issues in our own day. For Bürger, the avant-gardes were already in terminal decline when he published his study in 1973. Krauss and Foster, however, would each in their own distinctive ways dispute this by arguing that although the whole terrain of cultural production has certainly dramatically altered, the avant-gardes can still perform essential artistic and socio-political functions even now. For Bourdieu though, the avant-gardes are an historical phenomenon, the product of a distinct moment in the history of the field of cultural production that has now definitively disappeared. The object of my chapter will not be to validate either side of this debate, but to chart the way in which

⁸ See for example, Tony Pinkney's response to Franco Moretti's *New Left Review* article 'The Spell of Indecision'. He is highly critical of Moretti for his failure to engage with Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, arguing that 'a discussion of aesthetic modernity which ignores Bürger's intervention has, frankly, condemned itself to the prehistory of the 'Marxism and Modernism' debate. Tony Pinkney, 'Understanding Modernism: A Response to Franco Moretti,' *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 165, (January-February, 1988), 124-127 and Franco Moretti, 'The Spell of Indecision,' *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 164, (July-August, 1987), 124-127.

some notable left-wing theorists have addressed this issue, and in so doing to offer the reader an introductory guide to how left-wing theories of the avant-garde have evolved and to where matters now stand.

3.2 The Avant-Garde

If we had to isolate one major weakness in Anglo-American Marxist criticism of modernism, it would be that most of its major critics have assumed that political and aesthetic progress are more or less synonymous with each other. Hence, Franco Moretti warned in 1988 that contemporary Marxist criticism was in danger of becoming ‘little more than a left-wing “apology for modernism”’, treating its devices as inherently subversive of the existing social order.⁹ In particular, it was widely accepted that the artists of the so-called avant-garde were politically affiliated to the left. By the 1960s this assumption lacked serious credibility. The art of the historical avant-garde was attracting huge prices on the art markets and assertions that avant-garde art was especially resistant to commodification rang hollow. A new generation of (neo-) avant-garde artists began to emerge during this period and their work professed an ambiguous – indeed at times enthusiastic – interest in capitalist mass production techniques. Talk of a ‘crisis’ or even the ‘death’ of the avant-garde was commonplace and precipitated much

⁹ Franco Moretti, ‘The Spell of Indecision’ in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 346. Moretti understands modernism as ‘a crucial component of that great symbolic transformation that has taken place in modern Western societies: the meaning of life is sought no more in the realm of public life, politics, and work; instead, it has migrated into the world of consumption and private life.’ The ‘unending day-dreams’ of modernism ‘owe their very existence to the bored and blind difference of our public life’ and modernism’s ‘unbelievable range of political choices’ can only be understood ‘by its basic political indifference. (346f).

of the resurgence of critical interest in the movements.¹⁰ It is in this context that the work of Greenberg, Poggioli and Bürger needs to be understood. The work of each theorist is an attempt to create a systematic theory of the avant-garde and, in the case of the work of Poggioli and Bürger, a response to the historical disappointment of the post-war avant-gardes.

In spite of its importance to modernism, the concept of the avant-garde is far from being transparent. Before beginning to examine some of the key Marxist theoretical engagements with the avant-garde it is worth taking some time to examine the ideas associated with the movement. It is important that avant-garde art is not just understood as another period or 'style' such as Renaissance or Baroque art. In this section we will examine how the concept of the avant-garde has been defined by different theories and, in particular, how the traditional concept of the avant-garde has changed in the circumstances of mass culture and technical reproduction.

There is both a political and a cultural dimension to the concept of the avant-garde and both aspects are closely intertwined. The avant-garde was mentioned for the first time in connection with art in the political programmes of the French utopian socialists at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Henri de Saint-Simon, who particularly valued 'men of imagination', suggested that in order to transform modern industrialised society, it would only be necessary to gather together cohorts of leading

¹⁰ See Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, 'The Aporia of the Avant-Garde', in Michael Roloff, ed. *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, John Simon trans. (New York: Continuum, 1974), 16-41. Enzensberger's article captures the sense of crisis that pervaded many discussions of the avant-garde in the 1970s, arguing that 'the avant-garde has become its opposite; anachronism'(41).

¹¹ The term 'avant-garde' was adopted as a metaphor from military use in the 1820s by a group of utopians closely associated with Saint-Simon. See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 101-02.

intellectuals, scientists and artists, and join them with industrialists; this 'leader group' would then make the future ideal state a reality. He writes:

It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde. What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties in the epoch of their greatest development!¹²

By the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of avant-garde was being used widely in cultural debates with the implication that it represented the most advanced and stylistically innovative art. The avant-garde artist was regarded as the creator of a new kind of aesthetic which was opposed to traditional art and which pushed out the frontiers of artistic expression.¹³ These artists, despised by some and envied by others, were inventing what Dan Franck, in his study of the Parisian avant-garde, termed 'the century's language'.¹⁴ Franck also argues that bohemia played a central role in the development of the concept of the avant-garde. 'Bohemia' referred to a life-style which artists embraced in the second half of the nineteenth century in the large metropolitan cities of Europe, especially Paris, and by which they differentiated themselves from the way of life of the bourgeoisie. Because the world of the bohemians was deemed to be antagonistic to that of the bourgeoisie, bohemian art was regarded as a dissident or subversive art form by the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, the bohemian life-style and culture, in and of itself, was a crucial component of the avant-garde. The bohemian class was made possible by the rise of the modern culture industry, which

¹² Saint-Simone cited in Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 9.

¹³ The best-known representatives of avant-gardism in this sense were poets Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire and the painters of Lapin Agile.

¹⁴ Dan Franck, *The Bohemians: The Birth of Modern Art: Paris 1900-1930*, Cynthia Hope Liebow trans. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), xiv-xv.

dramatically increased the demand for artists and art workers over a relatively short period. There was suddenly a great demand for different kinds of cultural workers – artists, illustrators, printers, authors and performers – but the traditional, highly-valued position of the artist as a spiritual leader of society declined simultaneously. As Franck writes:

The avant-garde always stirs up trouble. But society accepts it in the end. The most recent trends soon make the boldness of preceding generations look tame. In its time, impressionism had given rise to . . . public outrage and critical anathema. Then neo-impressionism made its predecessor seem pale, before itself appearing dull and washed out next to the Fauves' horrors, which were in turn swept away by cubist monstrosities. In poetry, the Romantics were dethroned by the Parnassians, who were replaced by the symbolists, whom Blaise Cendrars was soon to see as 'already catalogued poets'.¹⁵

If we consider the concept of the avant-garde from an historical perspective, we can see how it has had both a political and artistic dimension which has taken a variety of forms for different movements and artists. Rimbaud and Verlaine, for example, were politically-committed avant-gardists, while Baudelaire's attitude to politics remained unclear. In the surrealist movement there were both political and artistic attempts at avant-garde practices, but finally the political alliance of surrealism and the Communist party turned out to be problematic. The majority of avant-garde artists have committed themselves only to bohemia and it is important to remember that it is impossible to separate the avant-garde as a movement from the 'radical and sensitive' bohemian class.¹⁶

Any attempt to theorise the avant-garde is fraught with difficulty. The avant-garde

¹⁵ Franck, *The Bohemians: The Birth of Modern*, xii.

¹⁶ Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Art and Ideas* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995), 20-22.

was not only transient and local in terms of structure but one of its primary characteristics was the informal nature of the avant-garde movements and groups. These movements have often been ephemeral and their actions have often been spontaneous and improvised. Typically, avant-garde movements exist on the margins of the official art world. Indeed, as Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon have argued, the avant-garde was often self-defining and was notorious for aggrandising its own history. This self-mythologisation stemmed from the avant-garde's attempts to court official recognition, while at the same time eluding the fate of establishment or officially-sanctioned art and remaining beyond the confines of orthodox sanctification.¹⁷ The phrase 'historical avant-garde' is often repeated in art theory. However, the avant-garde has never been a single, coherent phenomenon, but rather a collection of disparate phenomena. The Dadaism and Futurism of the 1910s and the Surrealism of the 1920s are exceptional avant-gardist phenomena in the sense that their history has been extensively documented; most of the other avant-garde movements have not been studied in nearly so much detail.¹⁸

We can conclude, therefore, that there are two principal characteristics of the historic avant-gardist movements: firstly, they have usually been transient in nature, and secondly, they have defined themselves as being antagonistic towards mainstream culture. The tension produced between these two different characteristics has proved to

¹⁷ Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.

¹⁸ R. Thom, *Paraboles et Catastrophes. Entretiens sur les mathématiques, la science et la philosophie réalisés par Giulio Giorello et Simona Morini* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983) is considered to be the key critical text of this period, although it has never been translated into English. See also, Marianne Oesterreicher-Mollwo, *Surrealism and Dadaism: Provocative Destruction, the Path Within, and the Exacerbation of the Problem of a Reconciliation of Art and Life* (London: Phaidon, 1979) and Eric Sellin, *Reflections on the Aesthetics of Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism: A Prosody Beyond Words* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).

be deeply problematic for the avant-garde. Corbusier recognised this problem in his 1924 tract *The City of Tomorrow*. 'People tax me very readily with being a revolutionary,' he wrote, but the 'equilibrium they try so hard to maintain is for vital reasons purely ephemeral: it is a balance which has to be perpetually re-established.'¹⁹ In the twentieth century, the avant-garde probably faced its most challenging situation in Germany of the 1930s, when these movements were exiled by the Nazi regime. The very concept 'avant-garde' is so contentious in German culture that even the German language has difficulty expressing it. When German theoreticians wrote about avant-garde art, they preferred to use the term 'modernism'; this usage continued until as late as the 1960's. The concept of the avant-garde has also been part of Russian-speaking culture, even though in the Soviet Union it was soon given a meaning that diverged considerably from the West European understanding of the term. In the Soviet Union, the avant-garde was appropriated by the official Stalinist art establishment, who reconstructed the term to describe official socialist cultural politics, and who renamed the West European avant-garde as the 'petit-bourgeois bohemia'.²⁰

While the European avant-gardes fell away after the Second World War, a new artistic avant-garde came to prominence in New York in the 1950s. The formation of this New York avant-garde has become a subject of considerable debate. The United States had long since produced its own indigenous art movements but it had never produced a style that had seriously influenced European artists. Europe had always dominated and set the agenda for the art world. However, with the advent of Abstract

¹⁹ Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow* cited in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 21.

²⁰ Enzensberger, 'The Aporias of the Avant-Garde', 18.

Expressionism, New York became the centre of the avant-garde world, as it created styles that influenced artists across the globe.²¹ As we have already discussed, the term avant-garde generally refers to a cohesive group of artists who possess a commitment to iconoclastic aesthetic values and who discard both popular culture and the bourgeois values of the middle-classes. But Diana Crane contends that if we accept this definition, then avant-garde artists can be differentiated from 'artists who produce popular art in the content of their works, the social backgrounds of the audience who appreciates them, and the nature of the organizations in which these works are displayed and sold.'²² Avant-garde art has a more arcane quality and its market tends to be comprised only of specialists who have the expertise to appreciate and evaluate it. In the United States, from the early 1940s to the early 1980s, the network of curators, galleries and museums interested in avant-garde art expanded enormously and the conception of the avant-garde expanded accordingly. Indeed, some commentators argue that this period marks the collapse and disappearance entirely of the avant-gardes and that modernist or avant-garde art was not only a reaction against but was also a constitutive part of this capitalist culture. The Western avant-gardes, they argued, were often dependent on the appropriation of forms of non-Western art in their search for notions of the 'primitive' or other exotic artforms that could be opposed to the artforms of industrial capitalism. As Jonathan Harris has argued:

The capitalist market in Europe and the United States at the same time provided the structures of exchange and consumption through which the avant-garde could reach a public. Art, within this account, was fully a part of

²¹ See Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²² Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, 1.

the commodity culture, although differentiated within it and by no means politically, socially or ideologically uniform.²³

Harris's point is confirmed by the recent sale of Jackson Pollock's *No. 5 1948* to a New York based financier for \$140 million, making it the most expensive painting ever sold.²⁴

The concept of the avant-garde was also a key theoretical issue in 1980s discussions about postmodernism, which were dominated by questions about the appropriation, originality and the disappearance of the aura. Laura Kipnis has argued that the prevalence of mass culture in postmodern societies transformed the existing cultural distinctions and

threatened to throw into disarray the founding assumptions of the traffic in high culture, from the sanctity of individual authorship – and all that it guarantees for the market in cultural objects – to the class divisions inherent in the spatial and monetary distinctions between mass and high culture (if not the spatial and monetary distinctions between their audiences).²⁵

Discussions about contemporary avant-gardes were reconstructed into debates about 'high' culture and 'popular' culture as theorists of the avant-garde confronted one of the key contradictions of the various movements. 'The avant-garde', writes Poggioli, 'is condemned to conquer, through the influence of fashion, the very popularity it once distained – and this is the beginning of its end'.²⁶

²³ Jonathon Harris, 'Introduction' in Francis Frascina and Jonathon Harris eds., *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London: Phaidon, 1992), 13.

²⁴ See David Osborne, 'Pollock's "No. 5, 1948" Commands Record Price for a Painting', *The Independent*, 3 November 2006, 2.

²⁵ Laura Kipnis, 'Repossessing Popular Culture' in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 375.

²⁶ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 9.

As we have seen in this section, the term 'avant-garde' has its origins in the early nineteenth century and as such long predates the term 'modernism'. Used to describe artistic and intellectual vanguards who would pave the way to a new future, the term has obvious affinities with the broader ideologies of improvement and modernisation, and yet at the same time the avant-gardes were often taken to be antagonistic to capitalism, the major driver of modernisation. Avant-garde art is often assumed to be hostile to both middle-class taste and to traditional popular culture, yet the avant-gardes have also always been intimately associated with the lower middle-class world of 'bohemia'. Were the avant-gardes, then, intrinsically hostile to the middle classes and revolutionary in nature or only one disaffected section of the middle-class? If they were sympathetic to working-class radicalism and to the revolutionary left, then how is their apparent aversion to mass or popular culture to be reconciled with such affiliations? Would not an art that wanted to defy the inherited middle-class art institutions (the galleries, museums, national canons of high art) have to make some concessions to popular taste or proletarian taste if it were to be socially effective? As we have also seen, the term 'avant-garde' was used in different ways in different national contexts in the twentieth century; it designates very different things in the Soviet Union and the United States for example.

However much the practices and the (self-) conception of the avant-gardes may have changed, or however much the nature or understanding of the avant-gardes may have differed been from one national context to another, or however transient and mutable the various avant-garde movements may have been, the term 'avant-garde' has always been crucial to any understanding of the rise and decline of modernism. The avant-garde signified a desire to smash through the inherited art establishment and to

create revolutionary new connections between artworld and lifeworld that gave modernism much of its radical panache and revolutionary *élan*. Were the term 'modernism' to be divorced from the term 'avant-garde', or to be restricted to the works of the modernist 'mandarins' only, then modernism would not look nearly so radical in complexion as it is normally perceived to be. This is why no study of modernism, or of the fate of modernism, can be complete without engaging the history and theory of the avant-gardes. It is in this context that the works of Greenberg, Poggioli and Bürger must be understood.

3.3 Clement Greenberg and America's Avant-Garde:

Francis Francina has argued that the major debates on the avant-gardes of the 1970s and 1980s have their origins in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States. It was during this period that the critical theory of what we now term 'modernism' was developed at the same time that Abstract Expressionism was produced and ratified.²⁷ Francina argues that modernism was highly influential on art history, theory and criticism, and indeed on art dealing and curatorship from the 1940s. He writes:

The dominance of modernism, the massive growth in entrepreneurial dealership, the status and function of museums in the mould of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the idea and reality of the 'Cold War', the role of imperialist ideology in the formation of a particular social matrix and culture in America and its perceived allies; these have been the sorts of connections made by those seeking a critique of conventional art history and criticism.²⁸

²⁷ Francis Francina, 'Introduction', *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 33-34.

²⁸ Francina, 'Introduction', *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 31.

The most prominent American exponents of modernism and the avant-gardes was Clement Greenberg, who argued that 'modernism includes more than art and literature. By now it covers almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture.'²⁹ Greenberg was closely associated with the institutionalisation in the American academy of abstract art and was one of the first champions of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Jonathan Harris remarks that while Greenberg was not the only influential critic writing about the Abstract Expressionists during the 1940s and 1950s, his work proved to be the most significant. It was Greenberg's version of the history of modernist art that was 'disseminated within the critical and art-pedagogic culture' of the United States and Anglophone Europe during the 1960s.³⁰ His 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' was first published in the prominent Marxist cultural journal, *Partisan Review*.³¹ After the Second World War Greenberg jettisoned his commitment to socialism and began to cling instead to avant-garde art as the means to combat the commodification of culture by global capitalism. As his biographer Florence Rubinfeld notes, Greenberg's long retreat from Marxism and his enthusiasm for the avant-garde are dialectically connected.

²⁹ Greenberg, cited in Frascina, 'Introduction', *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 31.

³⁰ Jonathan Harris, 'Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960', in Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris and Charles Harrison eds., *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 53.

³¹ *Partisan Review* was founded by William Phillips and Philip Rahv who both broke from the Communist Party in the 1930s after assessing the historical events in the Soviet Union, Spain and Germany. They wished to create an independent anti-Stalinist Marxist cultural journal free from the influence of socialist realism. In a letter to *New Masses* (the cultural journal of the Communist Party) in 1937, they wrote 'What distinguished *Partisan Review* from the *New Masses* was our struggle to free revolutionary literature from the domination by the immediate strategy of a political party.' Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Fall of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 75. See Wald, Chapter 3 for further discussion.

Where once he had been a Trotskyist defending socialism against Stalinism he now became a defender of the avant-garde against kitsch.³²

Greenberg's 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' was important for a number of reasons but principally because it brought attention to the work of the American avant-garde by identifying the concept of the avant-garde with the pursuit of 'art for art's sake'. The hallmark of the major modern movements that Greenberg termed avant-garde was their constant striving for ever-greater sovereignty or independence. They demanded autonomy for the arts from political and religious dictates and autonomy from other forms of representation, especially from those modes of art, such as literature and theatre, involving the unfolding of temporal narratives. The achievement of an abstract art wholly centered on the production of visual effects enabled the construction of a lineage of increasingly autonomous art running from Manet and Impressionism through Post-Impressionism and Cubism to Abstraction, a lineage that was subsequently extended by Greenberg to include the art of the 1950s and 1960s. This, Paul Wood argues, was what passed into wider currency as 'modernism' or the tradition of the 'avant-garde' and where those two categories first came to be regarded effectively as synonymous.³³

'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' is a deeply ideological essay, written, in part, as a response to the repression of modernist art in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and to

³² Florence Rubinfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997). See also Lee Siegel, 'A Life on Art's Barricade', *The New York Times*, March 29 1998, 21 September 2006 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/reviews/980329.29siegelt.html> and Charles Reeve, 'Balls and Strikes', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29, No. 7 (5 April 2007), 27-28.

³³ Paul Wood, 'Introduction' in Steve Edwards and Paul Wood, eds., *Art of the Avant-Gardes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

its replacement with the state-ordained styles of 'Aryan art' and 'Socialist Realism'.³⁴ Greenberg argued that modernism provided a critical commentary on human experience and was constantly changing in its struggle to contest kitsch culture, which was itself continuously developing. In the years after the Second World War Greenberg came to consider that the best avant-garde artists were emerging in America rather than in Europe: he believed that 'the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States'. This, he argued, was connected to the rise of the United States as the global power in economic and political terms after the Second World War.³⁵ In a 1955 essay 'American-Type Painting' he focuses in particular on the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Hans Hofmann and the other Abstract Expressionists, arguing that modernist art was moving towards greater emphasis on the 'flatness' of the picture plane.³⁶ These arguments were taken up in some quarters of the political establishment as a reason for using Abstract Expressionism as the basis for the advocacy of an apolitical or purely formalist American modernism during the Cold War.³⁷ The mural or

³⁴ Greenberg's first piece of published criticism, a discussion of Brecht's novel *A Penny for the Poor*, was published in the *Partisan Review*, Winter 1939. The same issue featured an article on Soviet cinema by Dwight MacDonal, which Greenberg wrote to editors criticising. The editors of *Partisan Review*, including MacDonal, invited him to develop his arguments into a full-length article that became 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. See Reeve, 'Balls and Strikes', 27.

³⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'The decline of Cubism' in John O'Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 211-216.

³⁶ Clement Greenberg, 'American Type Painting' in John O'Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 217-236.

³⁷ See for example, Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999). Saunders's work reveals how the CIA and its allies in the Museum of Modern Art secretly provided vast sums of money to promote Abstract Expressionist as an 'anti-Communist ideology, the ideology of freedom, of free enterprise. Non-figurative and politically silent it was the very antithesis of socialist realism' (254). Abstract Expressionism was also used to attack politically committed artists in Europe. As Saunders argues 'one of the extraordinary features of the role that American painting played in the cultural Cold War is not the fact that it became part of the enterprise, but that a movement which so deliberately declared itself to be apolitical could become so intensely politicized' (275). While Saunders provides a detailed and fascinating account of this period she does make some simplistic and dismissive condemnations of Abstract Expressionism as painting 'for the Cold

quasi-mural size of work by the Abstract Expressionists has also been regarded as signifying, or embodying, a particular American element – using European modernist forms but transposing them within a new overall form of pictorial organisation. Greenberg described this altered ‘situational field’ of decisions, preferences and choices within the work of these artists as ‘American-type’ painting.³⁸ He argues that while the Abstract Expressionists had ‘set out to make good pictures’ their breakout of provinciality was, for Greenberg, to do with being American and with a sense of commitment to the values of a principled individualism.

Greenberg’s interpretation of the avant-garde was strongly influenced by the aesthetic philosophy of Kant and Plato, which helps to explain why his work was so well-received in art theory. Greenberg argued for the central importance of avant-garde and modernism in art as a means to resist the ‘dumbing down’ of culture caused by the rapid growth in consumerism in the early decades of the twentieth century. The word that Greenberg deployed to explain this developing phenomenon was ‘kitsch’, a word that the essay popularised, even if its connotations have since changed. Avant-garde art, he argued, arose as part of a movement of cultural critique within the bourgeoisie and is thus linked with revolution. However, as this art began to move away from critical content, it turned in on itself and its focus became its own subjectivity. Thus, art which began as a critique of culture is now valued only by a minority in society, and the new

War’. She implies that an Ad Reinhardt canvas should be elevated above a Mark Rothko because Reinhardt joined the 1963 civil rights march on Washington. At the same time, she avoids attacking the black musicians who were also secretly funded by the CIA as a way of promoting a false picture of racial harmony in the US to its European critics. See Josef Joffe ‘American’s Secret Weapon’ *The New York Times*, 23 April 2000. See Edward Said’s review of Saunderson’s book, ‘Hey, Mister, you want dirty book?’ in *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 19 (30 September 1999).

³⁸ Greenberg, ‘American-Type Painting’, 218.

art of the masses, or 'kitsch', is, Greenberg contends, fundamentally conservative and uncultured:

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility [to the values of genuine culture]. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.³⁹

Greenberg located the appeal of kitsch in the ease with which it carries values extrinsic to art, as opposed to those of art for art's sake. As avant-garde art has moved away from content, it has placed more emphasis on form and has become more 'pure' or 'non-objective'. In this respect it had become more like music. In Greenberg's words: 'Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself . . . Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cezanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in.'⁴⁰

Greenberg deploys the terms 'avant-garde' and 'kitsch' to describe the cultural polarities observable within the same society. Kitsch is the cultural property of 'the great masses of the exploited and poor' while avant-garde art is dependent upon the ruling classes. Kitsch, he argues, demands very little of its audience, just their money, while the function of the avant-garde was to 'find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence'.⁴¹ This is a direct

³⁹ Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', 52.

⁴⁰ Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', 50.

⁴¹ Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', 52, 49.

reference to the struggles between capitalism, Communism and Fascism during the build up to the Second World War. The relationships between art and ‘mass culture’, Greenberg argues, are necessary elements of any socialist discussion interested in society as a whole. Art and ‘mass culture’ are produced in the same capitalist society and are dialectically related to each other. He continues:

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* Cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end. A poem by Eliot and a poem by Eddie Guest – what perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other?⁴²

The word ‘seems’ is an important qualifier for Greenberg. He recognises the difference between what is good and what is bad, although he is also aware that his descriptions, analyses and evaluations are relative; the distinctions are after all between elements of what remains a single culture or way of life. As such, judgments and values related to ‘fine’ or ‘high’ art remain indissociably tied to a judgment on ‘mass culture’. Greenberg certainly condemns kitsch but he recognises its historical emergence alongside avant-garde art. It was the popularity of kitsch that disturbed him or, rather, its attempts to simulate the authenticity that Greenberg felt was the preserve of high culture and the avant-garde. ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’ was Greenberg’s attempt to come to terms with the reality and social consequences of mass culture, rather than to diagnose its individual patterns of production and consumption. Both ideas of ‘social’ and of ‘individual’ production involve already-formed values and discriminations – about types of media,

⁴² Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, 48.

conditions of production and the social relations of consumption. As Frascina argues, in a sense painting may be said to be produced by individuals but:

the enabling and structuring relations of patronage, economic exchange, exhibition and critical reception are fully social. The social relations within a society, such as in the USA during the 1930s, have serious consequences for the forms and practices of art, as cultural elements produced within that society. Capitalist relations particularly influence and shape the development of the culture as a whole.⁴³

In Greenberg's work, as in the work of Theodor Adorno, the concept of 'kitsch' and the emphasis on formal 'purity in art' carry a strong moral freight and the defense of art becomes part of a larger defense of Western culture. This discourages any historical analysis of the avant-garde's engagement with particular subjects and images from 'mass culture'. This, Frascina suggests, is because there is in Greenberg's work a concern with the concept of 'quality' (the disinterested discriminations of value) which is inseparable from the other aspects of the modernist paradigm.⁴⁴

Greenberg contends in 'American-Type Painting' that the development of the avant-garde in New York during the final two years of the Second World War was an aesthetic phenomena. Certainly he would admit that there were non-aesthetic enabling conditions – the growth of art institutions and markets in New York, the arrival of prestigious European *émigrés* and the artistic professionalism produced by the Works Progress Administration project.⁴⁵ However, the most important fact was the

⁴³ Frascina, 'Introduction', *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 37.

⁴⁴ Frascina, 'Introduction', *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 43.

⁴⁵ The Works Progress Administration, known as the WPA, was a United States government funded arts program with an artist's division. It ran from the mid 1930's to the mid 1940's. The artists who participated in the WPA ranged from figurative and academic all the way to abstraction and surrealism, in addition to almost every other school of painting, sculpture and the graphic arts, including prints and posters. The WPA program and Federal Project No. 1, as it was called, included many projects, among

simultaneous emergence of a group of individuals capable of, and committed to, engaging and extending the modernist tradition in roughly compatible ways. Whether their emphasis falls upon matters of form or of subject, most histories of the New York school advance some version of this model. He writes: 'what happened . . . was that a certain cluster of challenges was encountered, separately yet almost simultaneously, by six or seven painters who had their first one-man shows at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York between 1943 and 1946.'⁴⁶ The challenges Greenberg has in mind here are formal ones; for example, 'loosening up the relatively delimited illusion of shallow depth that the three master Cubists – Picasso, Braque, Léger – had adhered to since the closing out of Synthetic Cubism', and loosening up also that 'canon of rectilinear and curvilinear regularity in drawing and design which Cubism had imposed on almost all previous abstract art.' In other words, Greenberg understands the development of the avant-garde in New York towards the end of the Second World War in essentially formalist terms as a radicalisation and extension of earlier European versions of abstract modernist art.

An alternative view to Greenberg's account is implicit within the emerging historical materialist interpretations of the New York school which emerged in the 1980s and is primarily associated with the work of Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983).⁴⁷ Guilbaut attempts to explain two major developments in the 1940s and 1950s: the supplanting of Paris by New York as the art centre of the world

which were the Art, Music, Theater and Writers Projects.

⁴⁶ Clement Greenberg, 'American-Type Painting', 218. The artists referred to and the dates of their first solo exhibitions are Pollock, November 1943; Hofmann, March 1944; Baziotes, October 1944; Motherwell, October, 1944; Rothko, January 1945; Still, February 1946.

⁴⁷ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

and the triumph of avant-garde expressionism over both the technical perfection of the Paris school and the social-realistic documentary and propaganda forms that characterised American creative production in the 1930s. Guilbaut rejects the more traditional formalist art historical approach in favour of what he terms a 'materialist' method, which argues that styles are generated as much from social factors outside the art world as they are from dynamics operating within it.⁴⁸ The acceptance of Abstract Expressionism by the art establishment was the result of the coalescence of economic and political factors with certain institutional interests and capacities. Paris, for example, was too weakened by the Second World War to continue to function as a major centre for the fine arts or to oppose challenges to the dominance of New York. This, coupled with the large-scale immigration of artists and intellectuals to the United States during this period, provided the US with the mandate to assume the role of an intellectual and artistic cultural capital. Secondly, Guilbaut contends, the widespread disengagement of artists and intellectuals from the Popular Front in the 1940s – what Guilbaut terms the 'de-Marxization of the intelligentsia' – caused creative individuals to seek new forms of expression. The Cold War intensified this pressure, discouraging radical political activity and induced artists and intellectuals to detach themselves from their earlier political ideologies.⁴⁹ Thirdly, Guilbaut argues, following the Second World War there was an expansion of audiences and institutional support for art, in particular innovative art. New museums and galleries were eager to establish themselves by challenging the traditional standards of high culture institutions. Finally, he argues, there was a change in the work of artists themselves. Guilbaut argues that throughout the period from the

⁴⁸ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 12.

⁴⁹ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 17-47.

1930s to the 1950s artists were eager to provide work that could communicate with the masses. This began to change with the political climate of the 1950s and was evident at a stylistic level. Guilbaut traces the development of style from the overt political symbolism of the 1930s (Socialist Realism) through to the adoption of primitive and mythological themes in the 1940s (Surrealism), to the adoption of a more abstract style in the 1950s (Abstract Expressionism) that stripped away all apparent external referents. It was, he argued, a style reflecting a 'political apoliticism'.⁵⁰

Guilbaut argues that the national and international success of the New York school of painting was understood as embodying the post-war United States liberal ideology and that the work of this school came to play an important role in US Cold War cultural imperialism. Although Guilbaut has been criticised by Michael Leja for conflating the formation and promotion of the New York avant-garde as a simple undifferentiated process, it is nevertheless possible to conclude from Guilbaut that there was a coherent group of artists who emerged from the political crises of the 1930s with a certain set of strategies for coping with the difficult conditions facing artists during the Second World War.⁵¹ For Guilbaut, there was a concurrence of interest, which may or may not have been coincidental, between the needs of the post-War American avant-garde artists and those of a liberal bourgeois American elite claiming US cultural supremacy over Europe.

Despite their differences in emphasis both Greenberg and Guilbaut agree on some fundamental points. Both consider this grouping of New York artists to be a real artistic movement with a substantial basis, whether formal or ideological. Secondly, both

⁵⁰ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 2.

⁵¹ Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 20.

portray the group formation as a product of related responses by individuals to general social and political problems. Thirdly, both assume that this initial instance of the avant-gardism in the United States is fundamentally continuous with the European manifestations which began in the late nineteenth century. As Leja has argued, neither Greenberg nor Guilbaut give much attention to how the New York avant-gardes took form as an entity; Greenberg is concerned with characterising the formal artistic achievements of Abstract Expressionism, while Guilbaut's work focuses on the school's involvement with the advancement of US cultural imperialism.

In his later essays on modernist painting, written in the early 1960s, Greenberg elaborates on the notion of autonomous art but ignores any discussion of kitsch and discards the term 'avant-garde'. His writings of this period contend that modernist art had assumed a self-critical stance, culminating in the discovery and application of each medium's specific qualities. Historically speaking, Greenberg's theory considers only the French *l'art pour l'art* movement of the nineteenth century, and it is not directly comparable with Poggioli's theory which we will discuss in a moment. Poggioli was, however, aware of Greenberg's critique of mass culture, and commented on it in his own work. Greenberg held fast to his argument in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' and chose the 1939 essay to introduce *Art and Culture*, his 1961 book on the relationship between aesthetics and culture. This ensured that the 1939 essay would once again be central to the debate on the avant-garde when it reemerged in the 1960s following what came to be known as the 'crisis of the avant-garde'. By the 1960s it could no longer be assumed that the avant-gardes were politically inclined to the left, and talk of the 'crisis' or even of the 'death' of the avant-garde was now commonplace. Indeed, it is this sense of 'crisis' that motivates both Renato Poggioli's and Peter Bürger's studies of the avant-garde.

Poggioli, like Greenberg, sees avant-garde art as resulting from a clash between the conventional and the experimental that dislodges what has become clichéd.

However we regard Greenberg's work on the avant-garde today, there is no doubt that his emergence as a major theorist of modernism was an event of some importance. Americans had played a prominent role in the formation and in the promotion of modernism from the outset: Henry James had pioneered modernist or proto-modernist techniques in the novel, Ezra Pound had coined the famous modernist slogan 'make it new', and T. S. Eliot became not only one of the decisive modernist poets, but also a leading critic and cultural gatekeeper in the world of Anglophone letters. But this earlier generation had all migrated from America to England and Europe; while they had all been associated with artistic radicalism, their political affiliations were conservative, and they had all been linked to the 'mandarin' rather than the 'avant-garde' pole of modernism. Greenberg, in contrast, remained on in the US; he had been associated (however ambiguously) with the left rather than the right in political terms; and his most famous publication was on the topic of avant-garde art rather than on individual genius. He was, moreover, unlike James, Pound or Eliot, interested more in the visual than the literary arts, and he was primarily a critic and not, as they had been, an actual artist. What makes Greenberg important, then, is that he was *both* one of the seminal theoreticians of the avant-garde and that he belongs to that moment when the avant-garde, certainly in the world of painting and the fine arts, seems to migrate from Europe to the United States (whereas earlier intellectual traffic had been mainly in the other direction). Greenberg's theory of the avant-garde, therefore, must be seen as an act of resistance to American mass culture, since mass culture is for him the enemy that gives modernism its vocation, and as part of a wider American appropriation of modernism

from the 1930s onwards. He is in this sense a key figure for the development of a specific American conception of the history and function of modernism and, because of his preoccupation with kitsch and mass culture, someone whose work anticipates concerns later to be taken up – most famously by fellow American Fredric Jameson perhaps – under the rubric of ‘postmodernism’.

3.4 Renato Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*

Renato Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* ([1962] 1968) is one of the earliest attempts to construct a systematic theory of the avant-garde. Although rarely mentioned today, its influence can still be seen in contemporary discussions of modernism, postmodernism and the avant-garde and, in particular, on Peter Bürger’s study of the same title.⁵² Poggioli’s work attempts to offer a sociological and psychological explanation for the emergence of avant-gardist phenomena:

It is my intention in these pages to study avant-garde art as a historical concept, a center of tendencies and ideas. I want to outline its anatomy or biology: the aim is diagnosis and not, as with severe adversaries and the more indulgent would-be reformers, therapeutic treatment . . . Avant-garde art, in this essay, will be considered both as a manifold and as a general phenomenon. In the case of a phenomenon belonging to the history of art, this means treating it not so much as an aesthetic fact as a sociological one.⁵³

Poggioli sees the tendency of the avant-garde to concentrate on creativity as a ‘necessary reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech, where the practical

⁵² David Harvey is one of the few contemporary critics to cite Poggioli’s work. Harvey argues that it is one of ‘the most lucid’ accounts of the emergence of the avant-garde and cites it as an influence in the development of his theory of the transition from modernism to postmodernism. See Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Part 1. Poggioli’s work is also utilised by Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) and Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

⁵³ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 3

end of the quantitative communication spoils the quality of expressive means.’⁵⁴ He considers the impact of mass culture on the avant-garde, particularly in relation to the United States, where Poggioli lived and taught, and where, as we have seen, the dichotomy between mass culture and high culture opened up much earlier than in Europe. Poggioli’s theory is important not only as a history of ideas but because it links the avant-garde to early German romanticism and surrealism. It can be regarded as an important milestone against which it is possible to compare other interpretations of the avant-garde.

Poggioli not only advances a theory of the avant-garde but also studies ‘avant-garde art as a historical concept, a centre of tendencies and ideas,’ not merely in itself but ‘through what it reveals, inside and outside of art itself, of a common psychological condition’.⁵⁵ The avant-garde in art (and literature and music) comes into being when it becomes conscious of itself, as it does for art only towards the end of the nineteenth century. He links the avant-garde movements – Futurism, Dada, agonism, nihilism, experimentalism, activism – with romanticism, arguing that before romanticism conceptions of anything resembling the avant-garde were virtually unknown. Poggioli contends that avant-garde art is connected to romanticism not merely by its spirit of revolution and its cult of what is different and strange, but by its aristocratic origins. For him, this renders the avant-garde anti-proletarian regardless of its espousal of left-wing ideologies. Poggioli also argues that there is an element of neo-primitivism in both the

⁵⁴ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80.

⁵⁵ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 3-4.

avant-garde and in romanticism.⁵⁶

Poggioli argues that the avant-garde came into being largely as a nineteenth-century socio-cultural phenomenon, although its roots can be located as early as the eighteenth century. It took shape as a movement in the later half of the nineteenth century when writers like Rimbaud and Mallarmé became conscious of their role as innovators and of their antagonism to public taste and to the values of the establishment. The avant-garde accepted and thrived on that opposition and on the hostile conditions under which they worked in the name of art. The Paris Commune is for Poggioli an important marker in the history of the avant-garde. He argues that the division between the artistic and political avant-gardes can be dated to the Commune of 1871 and to the growth of small artistic reviews throughout the 1880s.⁵⁷ As we already asserted, one of the major weaknesses in Marxist critical responses to modernism is the willingness to equate political and aesthetic progress. But for Poggioli the watershed or crisis that motivated renewed interest in the avant-garde emerged in that post-revolutionary moment after the Commune when an avant-garde praxis seemed increasingly impossible – his work, therefore, highlights the nonalignment of political and aesthetic avant-gardes.

Like Greenberg, Poggioli understood that the relationship of the avant-garde to its surrounding society was dialectical. The anti-political politics of the avant-garde are made possible by a specific political and social formation. Avant-garde art thrived on its

⁵⁶ Walter Ong, in a review of Poggioli's work, comments that neo-primitivism is a modern version of the pastoral, which never interested real shepherds, who wanted to get into the city, not out of it. See Walter Ong, 'Review of Theory of the Avant-Garde', *American Literature* Vol. 40 No. 4 (January 1969), 589.

⁵⁷ Poggioli cites *La Revue Indépendante*, founded in 1880, as the last avant-garde that unites cultural and political progressives. See Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 10.

anti-establishment ethos, yet in order to flourish it needed a tolerant and compliant regime. As Poggioli remarks:

The avant-garde, like any culture, can only flower in a climate where political liberty triumphs, even if it often assumes a hostile pose toward democratic and liberal society. Avant-garde art is by its nature incapable of surviving not only the persecution, but even the protection or the official patronage of a totalitarian state and a collective society, whereas the hostility of public opinion can be useful to it.⁵⁸

While many of these arguments are familiar to scholars today, Poggioli's study was the first to locate avant-garde movements within the social conditions of their production. Indeed, he states at the beginning of his work that the scientific nature of his ambition is to study this 'already explored but not mapped territory' by establishing a 'dialectic of movements', a phenomenology of the avant-garde.⁵⁹ Poggioli's central thesis focuses on the alienation of the avant-gardes: 'one might even claim that the creation of the alienated mentality (and the avant-garde itself, for that matter) is a phenomenon at least conditioned by the practical, ideological, and spiritual effects of the sudden, relatively recent transformation of the artist's economic position'.⁶⁰ In both the decadent school and in Futurism, Poggioli detects a consciousness belonging neither to the past nor to the future but to an eternal crisis or transition. The avant-garde sense of time implies that all work is 'in progress' – continuously intent on undoing the old or renewing the new, never achieving any kind of stasis or period of definitive consolidation.

In the opening pages Poggioli writes of the 'psychological condition' that precipitates the avant-garde: 'by psychological, I mean that part of avant-garde art which

⁵⁸ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 95.

⁵⁹ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 3.

⁶⁰ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 112.

remains a fact of nature (if only historically)'.⁶¹ And in the closing pages, where he makes a brief attempt to arrange things historically, he goes even further arguing that 'the avant-garde is a law of nature for contemporary and modern art.' The two quotations are obscure even in context, and must be referred to another statement: 'Nothing is more new and modern than the modern cult of the new.'⁶² But, as Roger Shattuck has argued in his commentary of Poggioli, novelty is a prescriptive law for us:

Yet that affirmation collapses the structure of the book and empties its subject of meaning. If we explain avant-garde activity by a law of nature, the tension described by Poggioli's central concept of alienation becomes an illusion and the artist's opposition to bourgeois society merely the subjective registering of the blind workings of law.⁶³

If the avant-garde is not the cumulative product of many individual artists and writers making decisions and taking risks and reacting to their surroundings in different ways, then it is unclear where Poggioli wishes to locate the agency for the sequence of innovations which absorb his attention.

Poggioli's theory revolves around a series of 'moments' he has identified within the avant-garde movements – activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism. These terms define for him the developmental stages of an avant-garde movement. Activism, the initial stage, involves a situation where 'a movement takes shape and agitates for no other end than its own self, out of the sheer joy of dynamism'. Poggioli then describes the political use of the term as 'the tendency of certain individuals, parties or groups to act without heeding plans or programs, to function using any method . . . for the mere

⁶¹ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 7.

⁶² Roger Shattuck, 'After the Avant-Garde', *New York Review of Books* Vol. 14. No. 5 (12 March, 1970). Accessed 12 June 2005 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/11038>.

⁶³ Shattuck, 'After the Avant-Garde'. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/11038>.

sake of doing something'.⁶⁴ This could create a potentially dangerous or anarchic situation. An example of this impulse can be seen in the early twentieth-century Italian Futurists' glorification of mechanics, speed and indeed war, for their own aesthetic properties. Activism, he argues, is the least important or least characteristic moment, but he maintains that the avant-garde's fundamental concerns are with cultural, not political, problems. He writes: 'The only omnipresent or recurring political ideology within the avant-garde is the least political or most anti-political of all: Libertarianism and anarchism'.⁶⁵

Antagonism, the second stage, appears with more control and purpose, once specific subjects worthy of antagonising have been identified. Poggioli insists that the avant-garde antagonises 'tradition' and 'the public'. He does not offer a description of any particular psychological or professional problem that would generate such hostility but he reminds the reader that the antagonistic acts are 'made up more of gestures and insults than of articulate discourse'.⁶⁶ The work of the Dada movement will allow us to understand what Poggioli means here.⁶⁷ Richard Huelsenbeck, participant in and commentator on German Dada, argues that the Dadaist instinctively 'sees his mission in smashing the cultural ideology of the Germans'.⁶⁸ Huelsenbeck's description of 'demonstrations at which, in return for a suitable admission fee, everything connected

⁶⁴ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 56.

⁶⁵ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 97.

⁶⁶ Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), 42.

⁶⁷ Shattuck, 'After the Avant-Garde'. The Dada movement was a protest by a group of European artists against First World War, bourgeois society, and the conservatism of traditional thought. Its followers used non-sequiturs and absurdities to create artworks and performances which defied intellectual analysis. They also included 'found' objects in sculptures and installations. The founders included the French artist Jean Arp and the writers Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball. Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp were also key contributors. The Dada movement evolved into Surrealism in the 1920's.

⁶⁸ Richard Huelsenbeck cited in Shattuck, 'After the Avant-Garde'.

with culture and inwardness was symbolically massacred' does invoke a movement that really hated traditional culture. The Dadists emerged during the First World War and the ferocity of their reaction to German tradition must be understood in this context. They exemplify the nihilism that Poggioli describes as 'beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation'.⁶⁹ It was in Dadaism, he claimed, that, 'the nihilistic tendency functioned as the primary psychic condition'. This condition was embodied in a very pronounced way at the Cabaret Voltaire where the artistic events staged violated all the norms and conventions of theatre, music and art.⁷⁰

The final moment agonism, is, Poggioli argues, of unlimited importance as it represents one of the most far-reaching psychological tendencies in modern culture. He explains that an avant-garde movement can 'reach the point where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition . . . it welcomes or accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements'.⁷¹ 'Agonism', Poggioli writes, 'means tension . . . in short, agonism means sacrifice and consecration.' This sacrifice is 'felt as the fatal obligation of the individual artist' and its condition can be seen as the culmination of the prior moments, a point from which the avant-garde can move no further. The concept of 'transition' is central to the agonistic tendency. Transition involves 'the current generation and the culture of our day' becoming the 'subordinate function of a culture to come'. This mood is apparent in the closing lines of Huelsenbach's 'En Avant Dada': 'but if Dada dies

⁶⁹ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 95

⁷⁰ Shattuck suggests that the demonstrations described by Huelsenbeck may well be these events. In so doing the participants, including Tristan Tzara, Huelsenbeck and Hans Arp, were 'beating down barriers' of cultural ideology 'beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation'.

⁷¹ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 65.

here, it will some day appear on another planet with rattles and kettledrums, pot covers and simultaneous poems, and remind the old God that there are still people who are very well aware of the complete idiocy of the world'.⁷² The notion of transition deployed here differs from the approach of both Greenberg and Bürger who explain the avant-garde in terms of historical processes. What is unique in Poggioli's approach is his dedication to an analysis of the states of mind, instincts and feelings of individuals and groups as the basis for a theory of the avant-garde.

Ann Gibson has observed that both Bürger and Poggioli saw the avant-garde in a similar manner to the German Marxist Walter Benjamin.⁷³ Benjamin argued that the avant-gardes had attempted 'to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it'.⁷⁴ Where Bürger and Poggioli differ is in their estimates of what counts as exemplary avant-garde art and therefore in their description of both its histories and its legacy. For Poggioli, the alliance of what he called 'the two avant-gardes', one cultural artistic and one socio-political separated in France after the defeat of the Paris Commune. What is commonly understood as avant-garde art, he wrote, concentrated after the third quarter of the nineteenth century on formal creativity, rejecting conventional habits and incorporating 'the cult of novelty and even of the strange'. But Poggioli claims that this autonomous, cultural avant-garde did not leave behind its social task when it was no longer specifically critical of society.⁷⁵ He gives the example of Mondrian whose utopian goals for neo-plasticism Poggioli describes as 'antiseptic' and

⁷² Huelsenbach, 'En Avant Dada' cited in Shattuck, 'After the Avant-Garde'.
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/11038>.

⁷³ Ann Gibson, 'Avant-Garde' in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* Second Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 204.

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, cited in Gibson, 'Avant-Garde', 205.

⁷⁵ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 203.

Breton's surrealism whose insistence on the 'omnipotence of the dream' can only produce a 'quasi-mechanical product, a passive reflection.'⁷⁶ Poggioli held that the most effective avant-gardes reformed society by functioning as a cathartic therapy that could reinvigorate the stale languages of art, music and literature that had degenerated through thoughtless and habitual formulas. He argues for the need for value judgements that are not motivated by 'non-aesthetic' consideration: 'It is absolutely indispensable to distinguish the spurious from the genuine avant-gardism which results in art'.⁷⁷ Here we can see the influence of Adorno, and his argument that art should be autonomous, on the work of Poggioli.⁷⁸

As we will see in the next section Bürger understands art differently. For Bürger, art is not single works produced by individuals but, following Benjamin, are entities within an institutional framework that includes artists, dealers, critics, and museums collectors.⁷⁹ This framework, he argues, determines what art is supposed to be and do. Thus, for Bürger, the avant-garde cannot be separated from society but is inescapably implicated in it. Bürger disagrees with Poggioli that a radical turning point can be located in the mid-nineteenth century. As Jochen Schulte-Sasse argues, 'Bürger would find in our domestic debates about modernism an assumption that obscures the much more radical shift from Aestheticism to the historical avant-garde'.⁸⁰ As we will see in

⁷⁶ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 203.

⁷⁷ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 164-65.

⁷⁸ Adorno writes in 'Commitment' that works of art should 'point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life'. He also argues (as does Poggioli) that 'every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the commitment work or art.' Adorno supported this claim by arguing that even apparently apolitical art (he uses the examples of Beckett's plays and Kafka's novels) have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomime'. See Adorno, 'Commitment' in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), 192.

⁷⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 83-92.

⁸⁰ Jochen Schulte-Sasse, 'Forward' in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xiii.

the next section, Bürger locates the moment when aestheticism gave way to a historical avant-garde that attacked art as an institution, later than Poggioli, at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Bürger, the historical avant-garde movements were those most instrumental in contesting the deadening effects of art's institutionalisation. They included Italian futurism, German expressionism to a limited extent, cubist collage, and especially the movements of the 1920s, including Dadaism, the Russian avant-gardes after the October Revolution, and particularly surrealism.⁸¹ In the radical break that produced this historical avant-garde, he posited that collage and montage techniques were crucial since they broke with the idea that a work of art must be an organic whole. Although both Bürger and Poggioli clearly differ on surrealism's status as the model avant-garde, they both agree, in Poggioli words, that 'when a specific age, that has had its day, insists on repeating the promise it cannot now keep, it transforms itself, without further ado, into its own opposite'.⁸²

Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* was conceived, primarily, between 1946 and 1950.⁸³ As he was working on the text in the 1950s, the avant-gardes were undergoing a dramatic change and their terms and concepts were beginning to take hold in the Anglophone world, which had been historically hostile to their influence. Secondly, as Matei Calinescu argues, although the avant-gardes preserved some of their generic meanings, they had by the 1950s become a predominantly historical category.⁸⁴ Poggioli's views were conceived before the ideas encapsulated in the term 'postmodern'

⁸¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 109.

⁸² Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 223. Bürger liked surrealism while Poggioli did not, which is a little surprising, given their disagreements on the autonomy of art.

⁸³ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xvi-xvii.

⁸⁴ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 118.

had achieved currency. He did not deal with issues such as the appropriation of the avant-garde by mainstream culture. He failed to address issues of gender, race or sexual identity and hence, his conception of the avant-garde could seem quite outdated by the end of the twentieth century. However, despite its limitations his work on the avant-garde remains important for a number of reasons. He emphasises the need to distinguish between the historical and empirical which involves both a rereading of modernism and a rethinking of the very temporality of modernism itself. Although, as Andrew Hewitt has warned, creating a dissociation between the historical and the empirical risks creating a type of 'historical revisionism' in which, for example, Futurism, which was the most obvious threat to the political implications of the avant-garde, is constantly marginalised and denigrated.⁸⁵ Secondly, Poggioli's thesis that avant-garde history needs to be conceived of theoretically and not simply be understood chronologically or empirically is important and offers, probably, the text's most enduring legacy. This involved, not just the offering of an alternative view of history, but the recognition of a paradigm shift that is itself historical. Thirdly, Poggioli inaugurates a new critical perspective on modernism in which the adjective 'revolutionary' must be used with caution. He argues against a type of literary and cultural criticism that implicitly aligns categories of formal and political progressiveness to the point where the political perspective of a text can be exacted in terms of its formal innovation. Finally, Poggioli's thesis that avant-garde is incapable of surviving not only the persecution of establishment, but also the patronage of official culture, becomes important to the

⁸⁵ Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism*, 27.

analysis of the late-twentieth century culture where the avant-gardes become increasingly formalised and canonised.

3.5 Peter Bürger and the Historic Avant-Garde

Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has become widely regarded as the most important theoretical work to emerge from the 1968 generation of German literary critics that reached intellectual maturity in the heady days of the student movement, and whose intellectual icons are the key figures of Western Marxism: Lukács, Marcuse, Benjamin and Adorno. Bürger sets himself the challenge of understanding the aesthetic category of the avant-garde within its fundamental mutability. A critical theory of art, Bürger writes, 'must historicize aesthetic theory'.⁸⁶ Drawing on the German intellectual tradition of Kant and Schiller that stresses the autonomy of art, he emphasises the double nature of the category. He argues that this concept 'joins an element of truth (the apartness of art from the praxis of life) and an element of untruth (the hypostatization of this fact, which is a result of historical development, as the "essence of art")'.⁸⁷ This separation of art from the praxis of life, what Bürger terms *Lebenspraxis*, retains its force as long as idealist aesthetics looked to art to heal the disjunction that accompanies the increasingly pronounced division of labour associated with capitalist modernity. Here Bürger introduces his most important concept: art as an institution. By that he means both 'the productive and distributive apparatus and also the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works'.⁸⁸ Art in bourgeois society, although released 'from the demand that it fulfil a social function', could also

⁸⁶ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 15.

⁸⁷ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 46.

⁸⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

have a 'possible political content'.⁸⁹ It is this context that is radically called into question by the avant-garde.

For Bürger, the avant-garde can be understood as having evolved and emerged as part of the developmental process of the history of the European art institutions. Bürger begins by explaining how art developed from Sacral to Courtly and finally to Bourgeois forms. Sacral art is that of the Middle Ages where the artworks were produced collectively and received collectively as cult objects. Courtly art was produced by an individual for the glorification of courtly life and received collectively. In the bourgeois historical epoch, which took shape after the French revolution, art became less constrained. Artworks were produced by individuals for individuals and attained a market value. It was under these conditions, he claims, that art attained an autonomous status both institutionally and aesthetically.

Bürger's theory was influenced by some of the key Marxist cultural debates of the twentieth century and draws, in particular, on the work of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Adorno had argued that modernism expressed a protest against the commodification of capitalism. Writing in *Aesthetic Theory*, he argues that:

Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous . . . The power of [the modernist] work is that it syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character – which wipes out any human trace – with the objectivity of the work in itself, anterior to the living subject: The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity. The modern pays tribute to this vestige of the abstract in its concept. If in monopoly capitalism, it is primary exchange value and not use value, that is consumed, in the modern

⁸⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 25.

artwork it is its abstractness, that irritating indeterminateness of what it is and to what purpose it is, that becomes a cipher of what the work is.⁹⁰

For Adorno, it is the 'absoluteness' of the modernist work, its abstractness and visibly constructed character, which allows it to criticise a social world characterised by commodity fetishism, in which social relations are transformed into relations between things. Bürger develops Adorno's thesis and argues that what is distinctive about the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century is their 'attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life-praxis of men'.⁹¹ Avant-garde artists attempt to reconnect art and life and hence their first task is to criticise the institutions of art.⁹² This union of art and life is to be seen not in the subjects of individual works, but as the way art functions in society. Bürger, utilising Marx's concept of 'system immanent criticism', argues for a more specific approach that allows for the differences between these two approaches, whether one focuses on critiquing the style or the institution. The former critiques art as an institutional category within the art establishment, while the latter criticises the institution of art itself as a productive and distributive apparatus.⁹³

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Bürger also reconstructs the critically accepted conceptual unity of modernism into two opposing fields: 'aestheticism' and the 'avant-garde'. He argues that the emergence of aestheticism and its challenge by the avant-garde are a result of developments in the institutional status of art and the styles and contents of individual works. These changes, traditionally understood as the product of

⁹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 28.

⁹¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

⁹² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

⁹³ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 23.

art-historical endeavors, can now only be understood through the mediation of the institution of art. He does not discuss the category of modernism as such; indeed he seems determined to avoid the category completely. In order to characterise the avant-garde's break with any conception of the work of art as an organic unit, he draws on the work of Walter Benjamin and his study of Baroque *Trauerspiel* in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.⁹⁴ Benjamin argues that there are a number of important similarities between Baroque art and Expressionism. Baroque art utilises the concept of allegory in which '[i]n the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment; a rune . . . The false appearance (*Schein*) of totality is extinguished'.⁹⁵ Similarly, Benjamin argues that:

[t]he organic work of art seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. The opposite is true of the avant-gardist work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact. To this extent, montage may be considered to be the fundamental principle of avant-gardist art. The 'fitted' (*montierte*) work calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality-fragments; it breaks through the appearance (*Schein*) of totality. Paradoxically, the avant-gardist intention to destroy art as an institution is thus realized in the work of art itself. The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art.⁹⁶

Cubism, Bürger argues, was the decisive moment in the development of the avant-gardist technique of montage because cubism was the 'movement in modern painting which most consciously destroyed the representation system that had prevailed since the Renaissance'.⁹⁷ The revolutionary character of cubism lay in its incorporation of everyday life – for example pieces of newspapers – into the work of art because 'the

⁹⁴ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 68-73.

⁹⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* cited in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 69.

⁹⁶ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.

⁹⁷ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 73.

insertion of reality-fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms the work'.⁹⁸ Cubism also challenged the concept of art as an autonomous institution distinct from social life; although, as Bürger argues, this challenge to art as an institution is only 'implicit in Cubism: a painting by Picasso or Braque is still an aesthetic object'.⁹⁹

Modernist aesthetics, therefore, prepared the way for the avant-garde. Modernism makes possible a critique of the isolated status of art and the aspiration to defeat the sense of alienation that now characterises the experience of living in the modern world and to which *l'art pour l'art* is a response. Modernism, or what Bürger terms 'aesthetic modernism', is thus understood as a self-protective gesture. Here again Bürger is echoing Benjamin's argument about the aestheticism of Mallarmé and early twentieth-century artists. He described their aestheticism as 'a negative theology in the form of the idea of the "pure" art, which not only denied any social function for art but also any categorising by subject matter'.¹⁰⁰ Bürger's thesis is that the modernist work of art is unable to recognise its own protective gestures as ideological, nor question its own institutional status as art. It can therefore align itself with reactionary politics by highlighting and reinforcing the self-defining institutional role of autonomous art in the face of the 'masses'. It is the avant-garde that recognises the apolitical impulses of modernism for what they are and rejects the illusion of aesthetic autonomy within a self-reinforcing 'high' culture. The avant-garde tends to possess a much more productive acceptance of the *energies* of popular culture and even mass culture, and, in opposition to high culture as such, attempts to dissolve art into social life, to make its

⁹⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 74.

⁹⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 78.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 227.

transformatory aesthetic projects into projects for the transformation of the whole of the social sphere, and not only of a privileged minority. In Bürger's narrative, it is the avant-gardists who seek the sublation of art. Art was not something to be destroyed; rather, it needed to be absorbed into the praxis of life, where it could be preserved in a different form. 'The praxis of life to which Aestheticism refers and which it negates', writes Bürger, 'is the means-end rationality of the bourgeois everyday'.¹⁰¹ The avant-gardists do not attempt to integrate art into this praxis; in fact 'they assent to the aestheticist's rejection of the world and its means-ends rationality'. In other words, what distinguishes the avant-gardists from the aestheticists is their 'attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art'.¹⁰² Therefore, aestheticism comes to be a precondition of the avant-gardist intent. But the attempt by the avant-garde to reinstate art into the praxis of daily life failed and Bürger derides what he calls 'post-avant-garde art'. He argues that this 'post-avant-garde' art revives the techniques and procedures invented with political motives by the 'real' avant-garde and then cynically appropriates them for a renewed aestheticism.¹⁰³

The institution 'art', as Bürger understands it, is a typically European and bourgeois phenomenon, since only in the bourgeois period, from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, did art constitute a distinct social institution. For Bürger, the institution of art is historically specific. In previous historical periods art may have been an important part of the social institution, but it was not an institution in and of itself.

¹⁰¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

¹⁰² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49-50.

¹⁰³ Bürger's principal target here is Andy Warhol. In his discussion of Warhol's 1962 work *100 Campbell's Soup Cans*, Bürger argues that it 'contains resistance to the commodity society only for the person who wants to see it there'. Therefore, the 'neo-avant-garde' becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever'. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 61-62.

The avant-gardes sought to deconstruct the institution of art, but Bürger contends, in order for bourgeois art to be overcome, bourgeois society must be overcome as well. The failure to achieve this means the avant-garde's intention of reintegrating art into life praxis cannot occur in bourgeois society except in the form of a false sublation or an overcoming of the autonomous nature of art. That Bürger is unable to conceive of any transforming possibilities for society is implicit in his description of the limited possibilities for post-avant-garde art.

Bürger contends that 'the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes *the avant-garde as art*' and therefore the intention of genuine avant-garde art is negated. This, he argues, is 'true independently of the consciousness artists have of their activity, a consciousness that may be perfectly avant-gardist.'¹⁰⁴ For Bürger, it is the status of the avant-gardist work that is imperative, not the consciousness of their activity that characterises the social consequence of their work. 'Neo-avant-gardist art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term' because, Bürger argues, it 'negates the avant-gardist intention of returning art to the praxis of life'. Therefore, any effort to 'sublate art' becomes itself an 'artistic manifestation' that, regardless of the intention of the producer, take[s] on the character of a 'work of art'.¹⁰⁵

Bürger is attempting to reclaim the political radicalism of the term 'avant-garde' from critics like Greenberg who collapse it unproblematically into a formalist version of modernism. Greenberg's 'Avant-garde and Kitsch' was not written as a specifically avant-garde theory, although he does highlight his observations on the characteristics and purpose of such art. His descriptions of self-critical approaches to the medium could

¹⁰⁴ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58. [Bürger's emphasis].

¹⁰⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58.

be understood in Bürger's terms as 'system immanent criticism'. The avant-garde assumes a self-critical stance to art as a whole. This, according to Bürger, was apparent in Dadaism as he states, 'Dadaism, the most radical movement in the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution'. Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-mades' serve well as an example of this. These were functional objects chosen by him and exhibited as any other artwork. One important example 'Fountain, 1917' (a urinal) was submitted to a non-juried open art exhibition in New York. It was rejected on the grounds that it was 'immoral' and was a piece of 'plagiarism'. By choosing a mass-produced object, a functional element of life, Duchamp denies individual authorship, originality and the autonomy of the art object. While this action criticises art as an institution, it was not directed against a particular school or style, resulting in a failure to challenge the conventions of the art as an institution. Bürger argues that these avant-garde gestures are an historical phenomenon that failed to achieve its aims. That is, only those movements from the early twentieth century can be considered avant-garde. Later movements of a similar kind, such as the 'Neo-Dada' of Rauschenberg and Johns and the Fluxus group, are in this case 'post-avant-garde'. The reason for this distinction is that the effects of the historical movements had by that time become accepted under the autonomous realm of art. In a post-avant-garde phase, the institution accepts that everything asserted as art can indeed be art. Bürger assumes from this position that the avant-garde becomes incapable of criticising the institution. They failed in their attempts to lead art back to social life and now they only possess the ability to contest and overthrow traditional stylistic forms.

As Bürger writes, 'an art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance'.¹⁰⁶

In conclusion, we can say that Bürger's work raises an important question about whether the future of the avant-gardes: Why should art produced later in the twentieth century that resembles early avant-garde work be considered neo-avant-garde, rather than avant-garde? Bürger does not reflect on the future possibilities of an art integrated so fully into social life, but this failure does not appear to be motivated by an unwillingness to consider the future. Rather, Bürger is convinced by the closing pages of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that the avant-garde's integration of art into the praxis of life is impossible under capitalism, unless in the form of a false sublation or the overcoming of autonomous art.

3.6 Contemporary Theories of the Avant-Gardes

The work of Greenberg, Poggioli and Bürger set up the terms of the debate on the subject of the avant-gardes for much of the 1980s and 1990s. While Bürger's account of the emergence of the avant-garde is the most sophisticated and continues to dominate discussions of modernism, postmodernism and the avant-garde, it offers little equipment for examining the contemporary avant-garde scene. Therefore, by way of a conclusion, I want to briefly consider the work of three distinguished contemporary left-wing critics: Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and Pierre Bourdieu.

Both Krauss and Foster work within the tradition of Greenberg, in that they continue to have faith and interest in the contemporary avant-garde movements. Their

¹⁰⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.

work stresses the experimentation and formalist innovation of the contemporary avant-garde, arguing that they still retain a modest political function. The contemporary avant-gardes, they contend, have been important in shaping the political consciousness of race, gender and sexuality, even if they no longer possess the revolutionary vocation associated with earlier avant-garde movements. On the other hand, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is similar to that of Bürger. Bourdieu finds little value in the contemporary avant-gardes, seeing their work as both a surrender to and a celebration of the commodification of capitalist modernity. Considered collectively, the work of all three of these theorists illustrates how the topic of the avant-garde continues to be debated in interesting ways in contemporary theory.

Rosalind Krauss is Professor of Art History at Columbia University in New York.¹⁰⁷ She came to prominence as a theorist and a curator in the United States in the 1970s as one of the first critics to apply the critical theories of structuralism and poststructuralism to the visual arts.¹⁰⁸ Initially, Krauss adopted the methodology of Greenberg but she soon found herself in opposition to him as her work began to radically challenge the historicist premises that had dominated critical practice in the visual arts. The difference between her criticism and Greenberg's, Krauss argues in the introduction to her seminal text, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other*

¹⁰⁷ Krauss has also curated a number of important art exhibitions at major museums, including exhibitions on Joan Miro at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1970-73), on surrealism and photography at the Corcoran Museum of Art (1982-85), on Richard Serra at the Museum of Modern Art (1985-86) and on Robert Morris at the Guggenheim (1992-94). She also prepared an exhibition for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris called 'Formlessness: Modernism Against the Grain' in 1996.

¹⁰⁸ Krauss was part of the 'The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' conference at John Hopkins University in 1966 which is credited with bringing the theories of structuralism and poststructuralism to prominence in the United States.

Modernist Myths, is the difference between method and content.¹⁰⁹ Krauss contends that criticism is part of the continuous history of art and expressive of the human mind that 'art as a universal calls forth and is completed by judgment as another universal capacity of consciousness'. Therefore, she concludes, criticism must be tied to the independent object which provides the content of the critical act of making evaluative judgments. Criticism, Krauss argues against Greenberg, is the method by which the object of criticism is constituted and postmodernism the space within which the inversion of the critical categories of modernism is performed by artists and critics.

Krauss's work is clearly influenced by the changing climate of the New York art world. As early as 1966, the critic Harold Rosenberg could write: 'Instead of being . . . an act of rebellion, despair or self-indulgence, art is being normalized as a professional activity within society'.¹¹⁰ The New York avant-gardes peacefully co-existed with the liberal middle-classes who were sometimes stimulated, sometimes entertained, but never threatened by contemporary art.¹¹¹ Diana Crane has shown how along with these changes in the artist's social role, 'a group of academic critics began to play an increasingly influential role' in the New York art world. 'These critics emphasized the formal aspects of modernism at the expense of content and meaning, and consequently reinforced the role of the artist as aesthetic innovator rather than social critic'.¹¹² An interesting example of this shift can be seen in the replacement of *Artforum* by *October* as the dominant journal of the New York art world. Most of the contributions to

¹⁰⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge Mass. and London, MIT Press, 1985), 1-2.

¹¹⁰ Harold Rosenberg, cited in Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, 45.

¹¹¹ James Ackerman, 'The Demise of the Avant-Garde: Notes on the Sociology of Recent American Art', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 2 (1969), 371-384.

¹¹² Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, 45.

Artforum had been from artists and non-academic critics like the self-proclaimed New York Intellectuals of the 1950s. Krauss, along with Annette Michelson, left *Artforum* to found *October* in 1976. *October* concentrated on producing a more academic and philosophical analysis of contemporary art. Hal Foster described the transition between the two journals as 'the decline of the modernist critic of the *Artforum* type' and the 'rise of the cultural-theorist of the *October* sort'. He also argued that 'if the *Artforum* critic had one foot in the loft, the *October* critic had one foot in the academy and now she or he is often born there'.¹¹³

As we saw in the previous section, Bürger argued for a distinction between the historical avant-garde and modernism. Following on from this, Krauss argues that the historical avant-garde was the precursor to postmodernism, contending, for example, that Picasso's use of collage was an avant-garde practice that anticipates postmodern art with its emphasis on the play of language and technique at the expense of self-expression.¹¹⁴ In her 1985 essay 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', Krauss argues that the notion of originality has always been central to the avant-garde: 'One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse, and that is the theme of originality'.¹¹⁵ Krauss seeks to undermine these high-modernist values of unity and originality. She begins by examining a series of sculptures by Rodin that were exhibited together, some for the first time ever, in 1985 at the National Gallery, Washington. The exhibition consisted of 'pieces in plaster [like the *The Gates of Hell*] that had lain on the

¹¹³ Hal Foster, 'Art Agonistes', *New Left Review*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (March-April 2001), 149.

¹¹⁴ Krauss, 'In the Name of Picasso' in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 39. The most of the essays in this collection are revised versions of earlier essays that appeared in the journal *October*.

¹¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 157. This essay was first published as 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition', *October*, Vol. 18 (Autumn, 1981), 47-66.

shelves in storage . . . since the artist's death. Rodin was dead, yet audiences could see new Rodins.' This prompted Krauss to consider how art relates to the past, its own past and our own past. She writes:

modernism and the avant-garde are functions of originality, and that discourse serves much wider interests – and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions – than the restricted circle of professional art making. The theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art.¹¹⁶

Krauss concludes that the modernist notion of originality, the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, has now been abandoned in the postmodern period. The historical period that modernism and the avant-garde shared is over. It has been replaced by postmodernism, which acts to void the basic tenets of modernism, 'to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition'.¹¹⁷ The stylistic diversity of art after modernism (often uncritically celebrated under the rubric of 'pluralist') conceals from the viewer a unifying principle, what she calls the beat of a 'different drummer from the one called style'.¹¹⁸ Therefore, what postmodernism represents is not a shift in the appearance of art, but a shift in the manner in which art achieves meaning in the first place. This is perhaps best exemplified by photography and all art forms that rely on documentation.

In addition to Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* Krauss bases her argument on the work of Sherrie Levine and her photographs of photographs by Edward Watson. Krauss argues that Levine's photographs are examples of 'work that acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals' and that challenge the idea that there meaningful

¹¹⁶ Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', 162.

¹¹⁷ Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', 170.

¹¹⁸ Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', 169.

distinction between originals and replicas.¹¹⁹ As we have seen, one of the central motifs in Krauss's work is the concept of originality. She uses Rodin and Levine to challenge the notion of authenticity and to complicate the history of production on which the concept of "genuine" member of a set of multiples must rest. Krauss raises a number of important questions: How should we classify prints pulled or printed after the artist's death? What content has the notion of authenticity in the case of an artist like Rodin, whose later models were not only cast and painted by others but also realised in marble, in variety of sizes by mechanical means?

By 1968 artists such as Morris, LeWitt, Smithson and Serra had 'entered a situation the logical conditions of which can no longer be described as modernist' and the expansion of the category of sculpture to include land art and architecture 'brought about the shift into postmodernism'.¹²⁰ For Krauss, the challenge facing artists today is the difficulty in defining the social consensus that produces this meaning. One of the main reasons that Krauss's 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' continues to be an important essay is that it marked a shift from the study of art in terms of historical process to the study of art in terms of determinate fields of art and in terms of the discourses used to confer meaning on art. For Krauss, both modernism and the avant-gardes were preoccupied with the discourse of authenticity. Contemporary artists, on the other hand, are more concerned with the question of style and she argues that contemporary artists who draw on popular culture for techniques and imagery provide a stark and important contrast between traditional art institutions and the world, between capitulation and recapitulation.

¹¹⁹ Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', 168.

¹²⁰ Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 290.

The work of Hal Foster is also influenced by postmodernism, although he has distinguished in his writings between what he terms a 'radical' and 'merely complacent' postmodernism.¹²¹ Foster is Professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton and has written widely on aesthetics and postmodernism. Central to Foster's conception of the postmodern is the 'complicated relationship' between what he terms the 'prewar' and 'postwar' avant-gardes. He writes in the opening chapter of *The Return of the Real*:

If artists of the 1950s had mostly recycled avant-garde devices, artists of the 1960s had to elaborate them critically; the pressure of historical awareness permitted nothing less. This complicated relation between prewar and postwar avant-gardes – the theoretical question of avant-garde causality, temporality, and narrativity – is crucial to comprehend today. Far from being a quaint question, more and more depends on it: our very accounts of innovative Western art of the twentieth century.¹²²

In a recent interview Foster summarises the focus located, if obscurely, within his title, *The Return of the Real*. It is, he tells us, ' . . . meant to evoke two different ideas of the real which govern much art and theory today. The first is . . . the real of the obscene, of things that are too close, too gross, to be represented, of things that resist the symbolic or (better) that reveal its order to be in crisis, of which the damaged, diseased, or dead body is then presented as evidence. The other is the real of identity, of community, of site-specificity . . .'.¹²³ Foster argues that he 'wants to do to Bürger what Marx did to Hegel: to right his concept of the dialectic'.¹²⁴

Foster is keen to stress a notion of delay (partly unpacked from Freud's concept of

¹²¹ Hal Foster, 'Preface' in Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (San Francisco: Bay Press, 1983), 9.

¹²² Hal Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?' in Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Gardes at the End of the Century* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1996), 5.

¹²³ Miwon Kwon / Hal Foster, 'The Return of the Real, An Interview with Hal Foster', *Flash Art*, Vol. 24, No. 187 (March - April 1996), 63.

¹²⁴ Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?', 15.

trauma and the unconscious) through which radical critique is retrospectively connected to other insistent moments of transgression. The figure of Walter Benjamin, particularly through his speculations upon the correlation between two idiosyncratic historical periods, haunts Foster's own network of movements and chronological alignments.¹²⁵ The very idea of the avant-garde suggests a time of waiting, a holding out until the broader culture correctly connects with the future work of artists and thinkers whose aim it is to assemble and activate the new reality. It is pertinent, then, that Foster's book begins with the aforementioned set of questions about the function and possibility of critical practice today, before turning his focus onto Bürger. This leads him into some consideration of the boundaries of art and its institutions: He writes 'the institution of art may enframe aesthetic conventions, but it does not constitute them'.¹²⁶

Foster argues that Bürger's historicist approach assumed that the avant-garde was 'punctual and final'. If this was the situation, the avant-garde, such as Dada, would have only one chance to achieve its aims, or the aims it had assumed according to Bürger. Foster approaches the situation differently. He argues for what he terms a 'post-historical' view of the avant-garde. The concepts of 'Parallax', the idea that an object changes according to the position of the spectator, and 'deferred action', an event must be understood through a process of both 'anticipation and recollection' are central to Foster's theory. He argues that the 'historical avant-garde' (Bürger's term) anticipated the neo-avant-garde, which in turn recollected the historical avant-garde. Here, it becomes possible to reconsider historical events according to the present, or as Foster

¹²⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of History', in Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer', a lecture delivered in 1934, is another important work for Foster. It is included in Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

¹²⁶ Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?', 25.

proposed, 'the neo-avant-garde comprehend [the historical avant-garde] for the first time'.¹²⁷ If this is so, then any recollection of historical events will encourage a re-evaluation of the past. Foster's defence of the progressive and challenging nature of the contemporary avant-gardes seems to rest on his argument that they challenge conceptions of cultural reification, the mass media and probe sexual, ethnic and social differences; he cites the work of artists as diverse as Sherrie Levine, David Hammons and Robert Gober as exemplary avant-garde art of this kind. He argues that the 'failure of both the historic and first neo-avant-garde to destroy the institution of art has enabled the deconstructive testing of this institution by the second neo-avant-garde.'¹²⁸ Foster endorses the institutionalisation of the contemporary avant-gardes, arguing that the strength of its critique is a product of its dominant position within the institution of art.

Another key artist for Foster is Rauschenberg whose famous motto was that 'Painting relates to both art and life.'¹²⁹ Foster argues that the mission of the avant-garde 'is comprehended, if not completed' with the neo-avant-garde and with the minimalist school who contest the formalist assumptions of modernism. Foster argues that in *Factum I* and *II*, that canvases 'filled with found images and aleatory gestures' are repeated, imperfectly, in the other.¹³⁰ It is in these pieces that the contradiction between art and life that has existed since the Industrial Revolution is attenuated to and collapsed. Foster explores the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde and argues that the neo-avant-garde acts on the historical avant-gardes as much as

¹²⁷ Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?', 10, 11.

¹²⁸ Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?', 25.

¹²⁹ Rauschenberg cited in Foster, 'What's New about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', 18.

¹³⁰ Foster, 63.

it is acted on by it. In other words the avant-garde develops in what he terms 'deferred action'.¹³¹

Foster's thesis is vigorously argued, sophisticated and provocative but if we consider it in relation to the nature of the institutionalisation of art in contemporary society a number of difficulties emerge. It is not only museums and galleries that have become the gatekeepers of the contemporary art world. In the contemporary art world corporate sponsorship has become, increasingly, the ultimate arbiter of artistic success. A small number of galleries in London, New York and Paris control access to the auction market and commercial success. As Crane has argued, after the 1960s there is little representation in the art world of the social conflicts of this period, unlike for example, in contemporary literature. This suggests that 'the choice and presentation of subject matter by these painters is constrained . . . by the social-class background of their collectors and the conservative nature of the organizations that display and purchase these works – museums and corporations'.¹³² However, Foster would argue that Crane's judgment is unfair. Many writers and artists have relied on wealthy patrons to achieve their art. Joyce, for example, relied on numerous wealthy benefactors but this does not mean that his art expressed the values of these patrons. For Foster, then, the avant-gardes cannot be written off just because they failed to fully realise their aims. Their work continues to have contemporary relevance, with later avant-gardes continuing to learn from them and, in so doing, set themselves new tasks. A more accurate assessment would evaluate the avant-gardes in terms more than the temporal moment: their 'success' or 'failure' can only be gauged by what they managed to

¹³¹ Foster, 'What's New about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', 31.

¹³² Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, 138.

achieve within their own moment and by what they enabled later moments to achieve.

Finally, I work to consider the work of the late French Marxist theorist Pierre Bourdieu who offers an important theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of artistic production within late capitalism. Bourdieu was Director of Studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (the future *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*) and held the Chair of Sociology at the prestigious *Collège de France* until his death in 2002. He is primarily known in the Anglophone world for his 1979 volume *Distinction* (1979), which was translated into English in 1984.¹³³ In his conception of the field of art production, its status and value, Bourdieu argues that there is a constant struggle for power and domination. From within this logic it follows, Bourdieu argues, that ‘struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life and what is at stake in them is the accumulation of a form of capital . . . and that therefore there is a specific logic behind the accumulation of symbolic capital’.¹³⁴ The field of art production is the space in which artistic works are legitimised through their relationship with the accumulation of capital. To explore this field is to examine the power relations that compete to generate the capital necessary to constitute the artist and the work as authentic. Bourdieu defines a field by the particular logic through which it operates. He argues that struggle exists within a field, whether that field is artistic, cultural or educational, to acquire the capital that is at stake within it.

Within the field of art production, the avant-gardes hold significant capital because of their ability to recognise the break with the past and thereby to legitimise it. ‘It is the

¹³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

¹³⁴ Bourdieu cited in Bridget Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations* (London: Sage, 1997), 56.

accumulation of capital that legitimates an agent's position in the field, and thus authorises the agent as belonging within the field.' Therefore, tensions exist between the field of art production and the struggle for the accumulation of capital.¹³⁵ The attempt by the artist to produce work that is accepted by the institution of art validates the existence of that field through the belief that it exists. Thus, a conflict exists between those 'legitimately' placed within the field and those who wish to secure a position within it.¹³⁶ Bourdieu argues that this rupture becomes normative as the artist attempts to secure his or her position through the accumulation of capital. This rupture reveals itself as an acceptable breakthrough that is recognised as avant-garde. As that which is identified as avant-garde signifies a break with the past, thus the field of art production exists in relation to social space and historical time.¹³⁷ Social space or the space of social positionings constitutes the relations that enable an avant-garde to exist, both in the art that is produced and legitimised as avant-garde within the field of limited production, and through the recognition of this work as avant-garde. Therefore, in order for a piece of artwork to be included in the field of art production it requires a double recognition: its position in relation to the symbolic capital of the field must be accepted but it also requires a legitimate placement within the context of Western art history.

For Bourdieu, the qualities of revolt and resistance in relation to artistic freedom are now forgotten. He argues that the decisive moment of early modernism was the creation after 1848 of a separate world away from the bourgeois salons and the

¹³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, Susan Emanuel, trans. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 231-32.

¹³⁶ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 240.

¹³⁷ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 256.

marketplace, where art could be preserved and protected.¹³⁸ This artistic world existed on the margins of society where it was the work of art itself that was considered worthwhile, and the assumption was that the work could not pay. This, Bridget Fowler argues, is where Bourdieu's originality lies. Bourdieu links 'the origins of modernist literature to the external determinants of the writers, introducing the concept of artistic habitus, or learnt dispositions, through which artists expressed their social position within a distinctive artistic philosophy or set of meanings.¹³⁹ The final stage of modernism involves what Bourdieu terms the 'consecration' of modernism by systems, museums and galleries and the marketplace. Today visual art has become a stable global store of value and is considered by some financiers to be the most stable form of investment available. This indicates a radical shift in the understanding of the relationship between art and society. Bourdieu argues that this is because several of the conditions for avant-garde art have changed. There is a decline in the number of artists who can support themselves without having to sell their work. The high prices of modernist works have rebounded on the claimed 'disinterestedness' of the artist. Most importantly, there has been a change in the response of the dominant class to artists. Since the upper-middle classes have ceased being rigorously self-denying, it is art that has become the main claim to nobler existence and a popular form of philanthropy.¹⁴⁰ Bourdieu's work allows us to understand the role that culture plays within the marketplace, how changes in artistic 'taste' are related to changes within the structures

¹³⁸ Bourdieu is echoing Lukács's argument in *Studies in European Realism* that the arts were plunged into crisis following the failures of the 1848 revolutions. See Georg Lukacs, *Studies in European Realism*, (London: Merlin, 1950), 22-25.

¹³⁹ Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory*, 76-77.

¹⁴⁰ Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory*, 79.

of capitalism and the cultural implications of this commodification of the social life where what Perry Anderson has termed 'the bureaucratic economy of universal commodity production' reigns supreme, and the terms 'mass consumption and 'mass culture' have become synonymous with one another.¹⁴¹ These cultural shifts in production and consumption will be the subject of the next chapter.

3.7 Conclusion: The End?

So, what are some of the more interesting issues that have emerged in our review of left-wing conceptualisations of the avant-garde? Firstly, we might begin by observing a distinction between the debates on modernism, which we tracked in Chapters One and Two and the debate on the avant-gardes, which we have just tracked here. In the debates on modernism in Chapters One and Two we noted a steady widening of the geographical field of critical analysis. Whereas modernism was once, in canonical works from Georg Simmel to Malcolm Bradbury, associated with the great metropolitan cities of Europe and America (Paris, London, Vienna, New York, Chicago), in more recent times it has been increasingly theorised in terms of combined and uneven development within Europe (as in Perry Anderson's essay, 'Modernity and Revolution'), or in terms of a wider global crisis of imperialism (a debate centred, as we have seen, largely on Conrad and Joyce). Left-wing theories of modernism, in other words, have increasingly widened their field of vision and today some of the most lively theoretical work on the subject sees modernism as a mode of cultural production that emerged out of a set of collisions of various sorts between centre and periphery.

¹⁴¹ Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 328.

One could argue, though that debates about the avant-gardes (as opposed to modernism *per se*) have evolved in a distinctly different direction. Hence, the essential vector of debate seems to be from Europe to the United States. We noted that as early as Greenberg's work there is already an assumption that the avant-gardes in Europe have lost their vitality and that the American avant-gardes are now the most significant ones. Greenberg's championing of American Abstract Expressionism may be viewed, as we noted, as part of a larger American appropriation of modernism and the avant-gardes as a distinctively 'Western' and anti-Soviet, anti-communist art form. The European theorists – Poggioli, and especially Bürger and Bourdieu – are the ones most adamant that the avant-gardes are dead, killed off by an 'Americanised' world of consumerism and mass media that they were powerless to combat. The contemporary American critics Krauss and Foster, on the other hand, assert that the avant-gardes still perform useful functions and still retain some positive value. But whatever the views of a particular critic, the fate of the avant-garde is almost always theorised with reference to an implicitly Americanised mass consumer culture. America remains the key site of reference for nearly all work on the avant-garde of the post-Second World War period.

Yet, if debates about the historical fate of the avant-gardes are nearly always indexed in one way or another to debates about American mass culture, the major participants in those debates are both American *and* European. The debates about modernism and uneven development, or modernism and imperialism reviewed in Chapters One and Two were essentially Anglo-American, though they have also increasingly involved 'exilic' postcolonial intellectuals such as Achebe, Said and the Field Day intellectuals. The debates about the avant-garde, in contrast, tend to be more

Euro-American in nature – the key participants discussed here are American, Italian, French and German.

Does any of this matter? Well, it does seem interesting that when critics discuss the relationship between modernism and imperialism they do so largely in terms of ‘mandarin’ modernism (or what Bürger would call ‘aesthetic modernism’) rather than in terms of the collective avant-gardes. Were the avant-gardes then uninterested in the whole issue of empire or is it just that Marxist and postcolonial theorists have not yet got around to investigating such connections? The debates about the avant-gardes may well need eventually to be ‘opened out geographically’ in a way that the debates on high modernism have been in the works of Anderson, Eagleton, Said. But neither the heirs of the New York intellectuals nor those of the Frankfurt School seem particularly likely to follow this path: there is something stubbornly US and Franco- or Germano-centric about nearly all serious contemporary theories of the avant-garde.¹⁴² Within the wider field of left-wing analysis on modernism and the avant-garde there are, as we have seen, some divergences. Critics like Bürger or Bourdieu may have written obituaries to the avant-garde, but a few, like Foster, argue that rumours of their demise are generally exaggerated. Nevertheless, even Foster concedes that if the avant-gardes remain significant they continue to exist only in weakened and rather debilitated forms. Without the support and stimulus of large scale movements working to achieve political revolution, the artistic avant-gardes cannot command the interest they once did. Poggioli argues that this divorce of the political and the artistic avant-gardes had already occurred as early as the aftermath of the Paris Commune. Following the Collapse of Communism

¹⁴² The work of Susan Buck-Morss is a notable exception. See, for example, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).

after 1989, the whole landscape had unquestionably changed even more decisively and the gap has widened to a yawning gulf. This sense of decline of modernism and especially of the fading of the radical panache of the avant-garde movements haunts nearly all contemporary left-wing theory. It is manifested in the sense of melancholy that pervades the works of critics as diverse as Anderson, Eagleton, Jameson, T. J. Clarke, Bürger, Bourdieu, and many others. But eventually, of course, Marxists could not just restrict themselves to debating what had happened to modernism or to why the avant-gardes projects had either failed outright or run down and retreated. They had also to deal with what came after modernism. Given that the story of the decline of the avant-gardes has so often been associated with their migration to the US, or with their elimination in Europe due to the coming to that continent of a new US-style mass consumerism, it is fitting perhaps that the most vigorous left-wing theorists of the postmodern should have been an American. Fredric Jameson's synoptic theory of the postmodern will thus be the topic of our next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Capturing Postmodernism: Fredric Jameson's

Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 Introduction

By the 1970s many intellectuals in Europe and in America were beginning to argue that the modernist project in the arts was beginning to run out of steam. Discussions about the decline of the avant-gardes, most forcefully articulated by Peter Bürger's work discussed in the last chapter, were one manifestation of this sense of an impasse, but the growing body of work that critiqued various modes of modernism for their elitism, masculinism or eurocentrism were another.¹ By the closing decades of the century debates about the dilemmas of modernism were increasingly giving way to new debates about its displacement by 'postmodernism' – a term that signified a new social and cultural sensibility and new modes of intellectual thinking and artistic production that had gradually emerged since the 1960s. For the enthusiasts of the postmodern, modernism was now dismissed as too austere 'highbrow', too insensitive to local cultural differences, and too dismissive of popular or mass culture. From such a perspective, the postmodern was to be warmly greeted as a rupture with the more 'mandarin' or 'vanguardist' versions of modernism and many warmly greeted what were perceived to be more populist, playful and hybrid modes of postmodern art sensitive to the technologies of mass media and to the increasingly multiracial and multicultural

¹ See, for example, Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1984), Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998), Michael Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) and Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

worlds of the swinging modern post-industrial city. Viewed thus, postmodernism represented a liberating break from modernism that was often aristocratic and anti-democratic in sensibility or that had long since been assimilated into the official culture of capitalism even when its initial impulses may well have been fiercely anti-capitalist. Theoretical enthusiasm for the postmodern was most vividly expressed in the field of architecture, but it was soon extended to other disciplines and forms of culture as well.²

Many critics on the left viewed these developments with dismay because they had become attached to the idea that there was some sort of organic 'spiritual' affinity between Marxism and modernism. There was also a tendency to associatively link the postmodern in the arts to the various versions of poststructuralism and deconstruction that were deemed hostile to socialism. Viewed thus, the emergence of postmodernism in the arts appeared to be part of a wider cultural-intellectual attack on left coincident with the rise of political neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Alternatively, the term 'postmodernism' came to be associated with a capitulation to consumer culture, to identity politics, and with a larger defection from the transformative goals of modernism and of Marxism alike.³ The most forceful and authoritative expression of this left-wing critique of postmodernism was, and remains, Jürgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985).⁴ Written by one of Europe's leading contemporary

² See, for example, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972) and Charles Jenks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

³ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Voresungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985). The English language edition *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lecturers* trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1987). Habermas's other important contribution to the postmodern debate was his 1980 Frankfurt address 'Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt', *Kleine politische Schriften* (I-IV), Frankfurt, 1981. Perry Anderson notes that this German address was significantly longer and sharper in tone than the English version delivered a year later as a James Lecture in New York. 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', *New German Critique*, No. 4 (Winter

philosophers, and by a liberal-left intellectual with German Social Democratic affiliations, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* was directed not at postmodernism in the arts but at the various forms of 'French' intellectual theory that supposedly underpinned the postmodernist 'worldview'. For Habermas, his French contemporaries such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard and others were not the radicals they perceived themselves to be, but were instead conservative heirs to strands of anti-Enlightenment irrationalism that had earlier been articulated most forcefully by the German philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger. The critique of modernity and the Enlightenment made fashionable by the works of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and the New Philosophers represented, for Habermas, a kind of intellectual delinquency, a deeply dangerous abandonment of Enlightenment ideas of universalism, humanism and rational communication that could only pave the way for new modes of political reaction. For many on the left, Habermas's work gave eloquent expression to their own reflex suspicion of the postmodern in both in its academic and artistic forms.

It was perhaps because it seemed to be so out of step with the semi-official Marxist consensus on postmodernism that Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* has generated so much acclaim and so much debate ever since it was initially published in 1991.⁵ With the publication of his magisterial *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson had already established himself as one of the most significant cultural theorists in the Anglophone world and that text had also done a great deal to legitimise Marxist cultural theory within the American academy. Penned by

1981), 3-15. For a comparison between the German and English version see Perry Anderson: *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 36-39.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 146 (July-August, 1984), 53-92. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

a distinguished critic of international repute, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* was clearly a monumental work. Published by the left-wing press, Verso, the text was over 430 pages and was lavishly illustrated with images which included Andy Warhol's 'Diamond Dust Shoes', René Magritte's, 'Le modèle rouge', an interior photograph of the Westin Bonaventure and Diego Rivera's 'Man at the Crossroads'. Jameson's synoptic survey was a *tour de force* of cultural analysis that dealt with a wide array of topics from architecture and the visual arts to video, nostalgia movies, photography and fiction. The volume engaged with postmodernism not only in a wide variety of media, but also attempted to connect it to the economics of late-capitalism and to what Jameson theorised as attendant shifts in modes of subjectivity, spatial and temporal consciousness, and aesthetic apprehensions or sensibility. Whatever else it was, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* was clearly a bravura performance, a work that took on postmodernism not on the philosophical plane that Habermas had done, but in a broader historical materialist fashion that ranged across multiple fields of intellectual and artistic activity.⁶

If *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* has remained one of the defining texts of late-twentieth-century Marxism this is no doubt attributable not only to its formidable ambition, but also to the way in which Jameson managed to

⁶ Jameson's work on postmodernism has a wide following outside of the Anglophone world. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* was widely translated. It was translated into Chinese by Meizhen Wu, *Hou xian dai zhu yi huo wan qi zi ben zhu yi de wen hua luo ji* (Chu ban, 1998), translated into Spanish by José Luis Pardo Torío, *El posmodernismo o la lógica cultural del capitalismo avanzado* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1991) and translated into Hebrew by Adi Gintsburg, Moshe Ron and Hannan Hever, *Postmodernizm: o ha-Higayon ha-tarbuti shel ha-Kapitalizm ha-moderni* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2002). Indeed, many of his early interventions into the postmodern debate began as lectures in South East Asia. Jameson's *Postmodernism and Cultural Theories* was reproduced in Chinese as a series of lectures by Xi'an: Shanxi of the Teacher's University in 1987 as *Houxiandaizhuyi he Wenhualilun*. The lectures were reprinted in journals in Japan and Hong Kong in 1988, and reprinted in Taiwan in 1989 with new preface by Tang Xiaobing.

outflank expectations both on the left and the 'non-left' alike. For the anti-modernist, anti-Marxist enthusiasts of postmodernism, Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* was undoubtedly something of a dismaying work: just when modernism and Marxism were both supposed to be 'dead', here was a Marxist essaying a totalising account of postmodernism and doing so in the language of Marxism and in a way that clearly inferred that postmodernism was not a 'brave new world' or a radical new culture but in many respects a symptom of late capitalist crisis. In Jameson's view, postmodernism represented not so much an innovative or democratic advance beyond modernism as a deepening of the same dilemmas that modernism had tried but failed to surmount. But for those on the left who might have expected from Jameson a jeremiad against postmodernism in the arts of a kind to match Habermas's denunciation of the 'new conservatives' in philosophy, there were also surprises and disappointments. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* delivered no such reassurances: instead, Jameson vigorously repudiated such denunciations of postmodernism as inadequate modes of 'moralism' anathema to historical materialism proper. For Jameson, ethical dismissals of the postmodern were neither here nor there; what was called for were long-range materialist historicisations of the postmodern that would explain why it had emerged in the first place, that would identify its mix of radical and conservative potentials, and that would account for its undoubted appeal. Hence his repudiation of left-wing polemics against the postmodern and his call for modes of 'cognitive mapping' capable of making sense of the changed landscape of our times. It simply would not do for Marxists to content themselves with dismissing postmodernism as reactionary. For many on the left, therefore, Jameson's work represented a kind of reconciliation with the postmodern that was almost as heretical as

postmodernism itself. For all these reasons, then, there is justice in Perry Anderson's claim that Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* 'redrew the whole map of the postmodern at one stroke'.⁷

A decade and a half after its publication *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* still remains the most authoritative and widely influential left-wing work of cultural theory on postmodernism. Other significant works by leading Marxist critics have also emerged in the interim, but none has ever commanded the field in a way that Jameson's volume has done. For this reason, this chapter will concentrate its attention on Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* and will attempt to elucidate some of its most decisive arguments and interventions. This approach is justified, I believe, because, however controversial it may be, Jameson's work still manages to organise the field of left-wing debate on postmodernism. This does not mean, however, that Jameson's fellow Marxists colleagues and critics have not had important contributions to make in their own right. As we will see later in the chapter, these commentators have opened up important questions about Jameson's periodisation of the postmodern and about his assessment of its stylistic devices, its relationship to modernism, and its general political import. These are some of the issues that I shall want to investigate in this chapter.

To anticipate briefly, one of the basic arguments of this chapter will be that Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* does not represent a radical break or rupture with his earlier work but rather a continuation of that general enterprise. Following Douglas Kellner and Sean Homer, I will argue that, like *The Political Unconscious, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*,

⁷ See Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 54.

attempts to defend the intellectual legacies of Marxism (and to a lesser extent modernism) in an academic climate hostile to that project. Like *The Political Unconscious, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* is also a synoptic work, one that attempts to assimilate and absorb into Marxist terms modes of analysis often deemed to be anti- or post-Marxist in character. Jameson, in other words, attempts to 'capture' the postmodern for Marxism by rewriting it in Marxist terms, by embracing and not repudiating it. Secondly, the chapter will investigate the thorny issue of Jameson's periodisation by looking at how he diagnoses the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. This, I will suggest, is a matter on which he has sometimes shifted ground, these shifts signalling perhaps some wider areas of uncertainty. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a brief overview of two other significant Marxist analyses of postmodernism, David Harvey's *The Postmodern Condition* (1990) and Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996). Both of these texts are, in different ways, responses to Jameson's work and in examining them we will get a better sense of the variety of left-wing Anglophone response to the postmodern debates.

4.2 Jameson, Marxism and Postmodernism

Fredric Jameson is widely considered to be the foremost living Marxist critic and has had a long and distinguished academic career. He was Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego from 1967-1976. He then moved to the French Department at Yale University where he remained until 1983. He was Professor of Literature and the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz for three years, until 1986, and it was from there that he wrote his

analysis of postmodernism for *New Left Review*. In 1986, he moved to Duke University, where he has remained as Professor of Comparative Literature and the Director of the Centre for Cultural Theory. Marxism has always been at the heart of Jameson's critical method. Writing in 1975 he argued 'that to teach Marxism and tirelessly to demonstrate the nature of capitalism and of its consequences is a political act which needs no apologies.'⁸ Jameson has dedicated his career to this form of criticism. He argues for the importance of Marxist theory within the field of literary criticism on the basis that the field of literary studies is the 'weakest link' in 'bourgeois ideological domination' and, therefore, becomes a space where Marxism can achieve some of its 'most daring advances'. For Jameson, a career devoted to cultural theory is not an evasion of political responsibilities, but the field in which he can make his strongest contribution to the Marxist project:

The analysis of literary and cultural texts and the tasks of 'cultural revolution' in general, then, increasingly appear as central, not secondary, to socialist political strategies – necessary conditions for transforming the patterns of ideological closure and political passivity that are enforced in societies like ours less by fear of the police than by fascination with the page or screen.⁹

What is interesting is that at the time that Jameson is writing the above, literary theory was becoming more conceptually complex and disengaged. In his survey of Western Marxism, Perry Anderson argued that since the 1970s there has been a concerted shift away from the political and economic concerns of classical Marxism and a reorientation

⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'Notes Towards a Marxist Cultural Politics' cited in Homer, *Fredric Jameson* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 183.

⁹ Fredric Jameson and James Kavanagh, 'The Weakest Link: Marxism in Literary Studies' (1984) cited in Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 183.

towards questions of aesthetics and philosophy.¹⁰ This provides an interesting political context in which to consider Jameson's Marxist reading of postmodernism.

Very early on in the postmodern debate Jameson found himself in the foreground of attempts by Marxist literary and cultural critics to engage with postmodernism. He contextualised postmodernism by locating it within the development of capitalism, while simultaneously utilising postmodernism concepts in order to re-conceptualise Marxist theory and politics for the contemporary moment. Jameson was also one of the few critics to provide a materialist explanation for postmodernism, theorising postmodernism as a broad cultural phenomenon that is connected to the economic system of late capitalism. Douglas Kellner has argued that Jameson's work represents

[t]he culmination of a series of historical and theoretical studies which provide part of the methodology, framework, and theoretical analyses requisite for a theory of contemporary society which Jameson conceptualizes as a product of a specific historical trajectory: the transition from a discreet national system of state/monopoly capitalism to an interlocking system of multinational corporate capitalism.¹¹

It is important to understand that Jameson's intellectual interventions into the debate on postmodernism were not an arbitrary response to the fashions of the moment; rather, they were a logical consequence and necessary progression of his earlier work. Before considering Jameson's major works on postmodernism, therefore, I want to briefly consider how his earlier works connect to his engagements with theories of the postmodern condition.

¹⁰ See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 49-54.

¹¹ Douglas Kellner, 'Jameson, Marxism and Postmodernism' in *Postmodernism, Jameson, Critique* (Washington: Mouton Press, 1989), 19.

In *Marxism and Form* (1971) Jameson charts the changing terrain that Marxist criticism found itself in the 1970s. He focuses on the emergence of post-industrialism, the suppression of class politics by the media, the triumph of the image, the fragmentation of the subject, the disjunction between mundane experience and the global expansion of capitalism, and, finally, the decline and dissolution of metaphysics. Sean Homer suggests that, in retrospect, Jameson's analysis can be seen to anticipate all of the essential characteristics of the 1980s postmodernism debates.¹² In response to these changes Jameson advocated a post-industrial Marxism that would be capable of addressing itself to the present stage of 'postindustrial monopoly capitalism' in the United States.¹³ This text also represented Jameson's first attempt to synthesise Hegelian Marxism and New French Theory, an endeavour he continued in his next project *The Prison House of Language* (1972).¹⁴ Here, he provides a critical survey of the alternative traditions of Russian Formalism and French Structuralism. By 1976 Jameson had embraced what he called the 'end of modernity' and declared that history had ruptured, leaving a void that that would eventually be filled by the category of 'postmodernism':

All the straws in the wind seem to confirm the wide-spread feeling that, as Roman Guardini used to put it, 'modern times are now over,' and that some fundamental divide, some basic *coupure* or qualitative leap, now separates us decisively from what used to be the new world of the early mid-twentieth century, of triumphant modernism, and the revolt against positivism and Victorian or Third Republic bourgeois culture.¹⁵

¹² Sean Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 98.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, 'The Ideology of the Text', *Salmagundi*, Nos. 31-32 (Fall-Winter, 1976), 204-246, cited in Kellner 'Jameson, Marxims and Postmdoernism', 21. See also Fredric Jameson, 'Notes Toward a

Jameson goes on to argue that postmodernism implies the rejection of the isolation of 'literary' theory and a turn towards a broad 'cultural' theory. In his next major work, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson's attempt to develop a theory of postmodernism becomes more explicit.¹⁶ He moves beyond the critical surveys of his earlier work to engage directly with the latest key developments within contemporary cultural theory and he presents Marxism as a master narrative capable of providing an overarching synthesis of its theoretical rivals. He focuses on contemporary theoretical debates, in particular the contemporary French theories of Althusserian Marxism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. What Jameson does not include in this volume is the study of the contemporary situation that he called for in *Marxism and Form*. In other words, as Homer suggests, the focus of Jameson's theoretical project, at this point, continues to be the transition from classical realism to modernism.¹⁷

The publication of *The Political Unconscious* reinforced Jameson's position as one of the most important and influential Marxist literary critics of the time. It was also the text that secured Jameson's reputation as one of only a handful of Marxist critics whose work had enough brio and cutting edge to matter outside of Marxist circles, and there followed a noticeable upsurge of interest in his work in North America. The following year the Miami University of Ohio held a symposium on his work and the conference proceedings were published as a special issue of *Critical Exchange*. Two

Marxist Cultural Politics', *Minnesota Review*, No. 5 (1975), 35-39. Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text* (Winter 1979), 130-47.

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).

¹⁷ Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 99.

important journals of critical theory, *Diacritics* and *New Orleans Review*, devoted entire issues to discussions of Jameson's work.¹⁸

Homer has suggested that following the publication of *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson's ambition to establish a strong Marxist presence in the academy had been achieved. He had attained a theoretical legitimacy for his work, and therefore, he was free to pursue his long-postponed project of theorising the contemporary cultural moment.¹⁹ In a series of essays written in the early 1980s Jameson begins writing explicitly about postmodernism.²⁰ Beginning with his 1982 essay, 'The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate', Jameson attempts to map the various configurations of critical attitudes that shaped the ideological landscape of the debates on postmodernism.²¹ He observes that '[t]he problem of postmodernism – how its fundamental characteristics are to be described, whether it even exists in the first place, whether the very *concept* is of any use or is on the contrary, a mystification – this problem is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one'.²² Jameson initially suggested the possibility of a way through this impasse created by the two most

¹⁸ *Critical Exchange*, No. 14 (1983), *Diacritics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1982), *New Orleans Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1984). James Kavanagh cited in Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 37. Homer notes that this positive reception of Jameson was not unanimous. In Britain the reception was more muted and Homer cites Terry Eagleton's wry comment: 'For the question irresistibly raised for the Marxist reader of Jameson is simply this: how is a Marxist-structuralist analysis of a minor novel of Balzac to help shake the foundations of capitalism?' (37). One possible explanation for this Atlantic difference is that British Marxism was a more established critical and political discipline and, as a result, felt less of an obligation to accommodate itself to the criticisms of deconstruction.

¹⁹ Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 99.

²⁰ In a series of essays on film published in the early 1980s Jameson begins to apply his emerging theory of postmodernism to cultural artefacts. He considers the films of Goddard in 'From Criticism to History' *New Literary History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 1981) 367-76, he discusses Kubrick's *The Shining* in 'The Shining' *Social Text*, No. 4 (Autumn 1981), 114-125 and he analyses what he terms the 'first French postmodernist film,' Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva*, in 'On Diva', *Social Text*, No. 6 (Autumn 1982), 114-119.

²¹ Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate' in *New German Critique*, No. 33 (Fall, 1984), 53-65. It was reprinted in *The Ideologies of Theory Essays 1971-1986 Volume. 2: Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 103-113. [All citations are from this edition, unless otherwise stated].

²² Jameson, 'The Politics of Theory', 103. [Jameson's emphasis]

influential strains of thought within the postmodernism of the period. On the one hand, one encountered an uncritical celebration of the concept by the postmodernists themselves, and, on the other, the charge of cultural degeneracy which was being levelled by more traditional critics, older modernists, and the left in general. Jameson warns of the importance of avoiding either of these essentially moralising and polarising positions, and argues instead that a more fully historical and dialectical analysis of the situation must be developed: 'I have the feeling that the only adequate way out of this vicious cycle, besides praxis itself, is a dialectical view that seeks to grasp the present as history'.²³ At this point Jameson's theory of postmodernism is limited to a heterogeneous list of names, styles and forms and is essentially battling with the difficulty of arriving at a systematic definition, a problem that, he notes, is as inherent to the term 'postmodernism' as it was to the term 'modernism'.

In Jameson's next essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (1982), he attempts to describe the key features of postmodernism.²⁴ Drawing both on Jean Baudrillard's work on postmodernism and consumer society and on the Frankfurt School's critique of popular culture, Jameson sets out to analyse the major characteristics of postmodern culture: the substitution of pastiche for the satirical impulse of parody; the predilection for nostalgia and the flight from history as embodied

²³ Jameson, 'The Politics of Theory', 113.

²⁴ 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' was originally delivered as the Whitney Museum Lecture in the Autumn of 1982. It was first printed in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic; Essays on Postmodern Culture*. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 111-25. It formed the basis of 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' and in substantially the same form, the first chapter of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. It was also 'reprinted' in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Postmodernism and its Discontents* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 13-29, but with a consequential alteration: the section on 'schizophrenia' and Language Poetry was cut and the discussion of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel from the 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' essay was reconceived and put in its place. It is this Kaplan version that is reprinted in Jameson's *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*. (London: Verso, 1998). [All citations in this chapter are from the original reprinted in Foster ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic*, unless otherwise stated.]

in new forms of populist architecture; and the closing off of alternatives to capitalism through a fixation on the 'perpetual present'.²⁵ Relying on the critique of popular culture advanced by the Frankfurt School, he contends that contemporary cultural forms are marked by an

erosion of the older distinction between high culture and the so-called mass of popular culture. This is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, and in transmitting difficult and complex skills of reading, listening and seeing to its initiates.²⁶

In this passage he acknowledges that the makers of high modernism mobilised popular culture to high cultural ends, but he also contends that what changed with postmodernism was that the texts and practices of high culture became intermixed with the texts and practices of mass culture, 'to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw'.²⁷ In this essay, Jameson is essentially concentrating on distinguishing the differences between modernist culture and postmodern culture. It is not until 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' that Jameson begins to interpret postmodernism as a new cultural totality and cultural dominant corresponding to a new stage in capitalist development, so called late-capitalism.

²⁵ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', 125.

²⁶ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', 112. It is interesting, and indeed revealing, that in the revised version of this argument, 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', Jameson alters the above formulation in significant ways. He replaces the term 'popular culture' with 'commercial culture' and the phrase 'this whole "degraded" landscape' is substituted for 'the surrounding environment of philistinism'. See Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', 55.

²⁷ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', 112.

Jameson makes his most his most definitive contribution to the postmodernism debate in his 1984 article 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'.²⁸ He later expanded this article into a book-length study of the same name, which was published in 1991.²⁹ Jameson's decision to publish his thesis on postmodernism in the key Marxist journal of the period, *New Left Review*, is also significant as in doing so he positioned his intervention as an explicitly Marxist engagement with postmodernism. Jameson's intervention in the postmodernism debate can be understood as a defence of Marxist theory against the attacks by both the postmodernists and the poststructuralists who characterised Marxism as an outmoded totalising and reductionist discourse, unable to conceptualise the new features of contemporary post-industrial society. Jameson is therefore setting himself a difficult task in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. He rejects the standard thesis that postmodernism represents a structural break or systematic transformation which invalidates the Marxist position, while also disputing those classical Marxists who argue that there has been no structural break or essential transformation within capitalism.³⁰ Instead, Jameson fashions an alternative account that emphasises the structural transformation that has occurred within capitalism while simultaneously attempting to show that Marxist theory can provide a strong account of that transformation. Echoing the Frankfurt School's

²⁸ Jameson's 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' in *New Left Review* was translated into Spanish in 1986 and reprinted in *Casa de las Americas*, 141-173, three years later it was translated into Italian in 1989 and reprinted in *Garzanti Editore*, 7-103. See footnote no. 5 for translations of the 1991 volume.

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (London, Verso, 1991). The title of the book comes from the 1984 essay which was originally published in *New Left Review* and is presented, rewritten, as chapter one of the 1991 book. Much of the book consists of articles already published elsewhere, though neither the author nor the publisher signals the source of particular pieces. The result is at times confusing: we learn that chapter six is either a review of, or the introduction to, an exhibition catalogue (see p.180 for example) but, we are not told what the exhibition was.

³⁰ For example, Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). See, in particular, Chapter 5.

conception of the end of the individual, Jameson contends that the postmodern condition represents the end of the era of great auteurs, of individual style and of the subject in culture. He suggests that the correlation between postmodern texts and subjects within late-capitalism lies in the fact that both lack coherence, unity and depth and are characterised by a dispersed network of relations which is unstable, shifting and decentred.³¹ Jameson adopts the dialectical approach of Marxism in analysing postmodernism arguing that his project will be to ‘think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically . . . as catastrophe and progress altogether’, a method that involves considering both the regressive features and the progressive possibilities of postmodernism.³²

4.3 Postmodernism and Late Capitalism

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson sets himself the task of furnishing a theoretical understanding of ‘the postmodern moment’ within the totality of capitalist social, political and cultural relations, a strategy he summarises as follows:

I occasionally just get as tired of slogan ‘postmodern’ as anyone else, but when I am tempted to regret my complicity with it, to deplore its misuses and its notoriety, and to conclude with some reluctance that it raises more problems than it solves, I find myself pausing to wonder whether any other concept can dramatise the issues in quite so effective and economical a fashion . . . The rhetorical strategy of the preceding pages has involved an experiment, namely, the attempt to see whether by systematising something that is resolutely unsystematic, and historicizing something that is resolutely

³¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 14-16. This is similar to Jameson’s argument in *The Political Unconscious* that there is a close and complex relationship between cultural production and social experience.

³² Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*, 86.

ahistorical, one couldn't outflank it and force a historical way of at least thinking about that. 'We have to name the system': the highpoint of the 1960s finds an unexpected revival in the postmodern debate.³³

David Gross has highlighted how the very title of Jameson's text underscores the importance he attaches to the Marxist method and its ability 'to grasp the design of history as such'.³⁴ The phrase 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' is from Walter Benjamin's 'Theoretics of Knowledge, Theory of Progress' describing his own project half a century earlier. Jameson makes several references to Benjamin in his introduction and announces his intention to do with regard to our contemporary cultural life something similar to what Benjamin had done for Baudelaire, Paris and early high capitalism. His goal, Jameson writes, is 'to demonstrate through example that only Marxism can apply high philology to the texts of the past century'.³⁵ Jameson's approach to postmodernism is similar in that he insists that postmodernism must be seen as the 'cultural logic' of late or multinational capitalism, which, as Gross argues, 'implies that it is meaningful and correct to describe our era . . . as "late capitalist", and that it is possible to understand late capitalism in such a way as to be able to deduce its "cultural logic"'.³⁶ Jameson, thus attempts to historically contextualise postmodernism, taking the reader with ease from theoretical generalities to specific cases.

In the opening chapter of *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson uses the work of Andy Warhol to isolate what he argues are the distinctive features of postmodern art: 'a new depthlessness'; 'the waning of affect'; the

³³ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*, 418.

³⁴ David Gross, 'Marxism and Resistance: Fredric Jameson and the Moment of Postmodernism', in *Postmodernism / Jameson / Critique*, 97.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Theories of Knowledge, Theory of Progress', cited in Gross, 'Marxism and Resistance', 97.

³⁶ Gross, 'Marxism and Resistance', 97.

fragmentation of the subject; the reduction of the past to a source of endless pastiches (as in the contemporary taste for retro-styles in fashion and what Jameson terms 'nostalgia film'); a schizophrenic experience of the world in which 'the vivid perception of radical difference' replaces any sense of unifying relationships; and a 'strange new hallucinatory exhilaration' in the face of 'an unparalleled leap in the alienation' of everyday urban life.³⁷ Jameson contends that these characteristics of contemporary art can only be understood in the context of late capitalism, arguing that postmodernism is the cultural logic of the deep structural dynamics of international capitalism in its third or late phase. Like Perry Anderson in his essay 'Modernity and Revolution', Jameson constructs a series of distinctions between modernisation, modernism, and modernity that provide a productive insight into his work on postmodernism.³⁸ He correlates the aesthetic movements of realism, modernism and postmodernism with Mandel's historical periodisation of market, monopoly and late capitalism, respectively.³⁹ While he contends that these cultural dominants are dialectically related to the particular capitalist economic organisation of their time, he also insists that they possess a degree of relative autonomy in their own right. In order to develop this point, he attempts to show that while postmodernism originated in opposition to modernism, it has evolved into 'something more than a mere reaction' to modernism.⁴⁰

Jameson's argument that postmodernism is the cultural dominant of late or multinational capitalism borrows from Raymond Williams's influential theory that a given social formation will always consist of three cultural moments: 'dominant',

³⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 9, 10, 11, 16, 19, 33.

³⁸ Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 325.

³⁹ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1991), 185.

⁴⁰ Anders Stephanson, 'Regarding Postmodernism - A Conversation with Fredric Jameson', 44.

'emergent' and residual'.⁴¹ Williams argues that the move from one historical period to another does not usually involve the complete collapse of one cultural mode and the installation of another; rather, historical change can sometimes create a shift in the relative place of different cultural modes. Therefore, in a given social formation, different cultural modes will exist simultaneously, but only one will dominate. In Jameson's schema, postmodernism is the cultural dominant of late or multinational capitalism, modernism is the residual and the emergent is, as yet, unclear or unknown. Late capitalism is, for Jameson, 'the purest form of capital' because it involves an expansion into 'hitherto uncommodified areas'. He writes:

This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way. One is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious: that is, the destruction of precapitalist Third World agriculture by the Green Revolution, and the rise of the media and the advertising industry.⁴²

Within late capitalism all aspects of human life and human experience are commodified. Jameson uses the concept of 'critical distance' to explain the connection he sees between late capitalism and postmodernism. In earlier phases of bourgeois art, a sense of distance was always maintained between cultural production and capitalist society. Realist writers attempted to penetrate the appearances of everyday life and to arrive at some conceptualisation of the social whole. The modernists broke with this idea of mimesis and created a cult out of the work of art itself, celebrating its separation from the social world and what they saw as the limitations of the bourgeois concept of 'the

⁴¹ See Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980).

⁴² Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 36.

real'. Postmodern art is different to either of these because it is characterised by the fact that the concept of distance itself, including 'critical distance' in particular, has deliberately been eliminated. By creating this carefully delineated periodisation, Jameson is implying here that every oppositional form of culture has been neutralised and must employ reifying strategies of containment simply to survive. Multinational capitalism has developed to the extent that it now penetrates and colonises those spaces (Nature and the Unconscious) which in the past had provided space for critical effectivity.⁴³

Postmodernism rejects the concept of progress and abandons all sense of historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously plundering history and absorbing it into its own aesthetics. This development, Jameson argues, can be seen to correspond to the way in which 'the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very pre-capitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and archimedean footholds for critical effectivity'.⁴⁴ 'The idea', Jameson argues, 'is to create a mediatory concept, to construct a model which can be articulated in, and descriptive of, a whole series of different cultural phenomena. This unity or system is then placed in a relation to the infrastructural reality of late capitalism'.⁴⁵ Thus, Jameson finds the concept of postmodernism useful because it possesses a 'moment of truth', expressing the 'cognitive content' of multinational capital.⁴⁶

⁴³ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 49.

⁴⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 48-49.

⁴⁵ Jameson in Anders Stephanson, 'Regarding Postmodernism - A Conversation with Fredric Jameson' in Kellner (ed), *Postmodernism, Jameson, Critique*, 43.

⁴⁶ Jameson in Anders Stephanson, 'Regarding Postmodernism - A Conversation with Fredric Jameson', 55.

Let us consider, for example, Jameson's much admired analysis of the baroque interior of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. Here, Jameson illustrates the manner in which 'postmodern hyperspace . . . has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.'⁴⁷ Jameson's ability to weave together the general and the particular is not just an illustration of his skill as a critic, but is constitutive of his political contention. He is careful to avoid making an ethical assessment, either positive or negative, of postmodernist architecture, arguing instead that 'if postmodernism is a historical phenomenon, then the attempt to conceptualize it in terms of moral or moralizing judgments must finally be identified as a category-mistake.' Postmodern artworks cannot be simply dismissed as mystificatory but must 'be read as peculiar new forms of realism (or at least of the mimesis of reality)'.⁴⁸ This response, he argues, is consistent with Marx's approach to capitalism in *The Communist Manifesto*, 'a type of thinking . . . capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating the force of either judgment. We are somehow to lift our minds to a point which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race and the worst.'⁴⁹ Instead of nostalgically clinging to the exhausted forms of modernism, While Jameson's suggests that we should explore the critical potential inherent within postmodernism, he is careful to distance himself from enthusiastic affirmations of postmodern culture. His approach

⁴⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 44.

⁴⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 46, 49.

⁴⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 47.

is what we might term, ambiguous postmodernism; he refuses to either condemn or celebrate that culture.

Jameson's *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* must be credited with a number of important achievements. Perry Anderson has argued that Jameson's project is one of synthesis. Firstly, he assembles key aspects of the Western Marxist tradition into what Anderson terms, 'a formidable synthesis'. From Georg Lukács, Jameson takes the concept of periodisation and an interest in narrative theory; from Ernest Bloch, he takes a utopic aspiration for 'the hope and dreams hidden in a tarnished object-world'; from Jean-Paul Sartre, he devises his stress on the fluency of the textures of contemporary experience; from Henri Lefebvre, he acquires an interest in urban space; from Herbert Marcuse, he draws on the concept of high-tech consumption; from Louis Althusser, he receives the theory of ideology; and, most importantly, from Theodor Adorno, he inherits the desire to maintain the concept of the totality of the whole.⁵⁰ Anderson contends that these various elements of the Western Marxist tradition are not willfully soldered together, but are 'mobilized in an original enterprise which seems effortlessly to absorb them'.⁵¹

Secondly, while Jameson's work on postmodern can be understood as a defence of Marxist theory against postmodernism and poststructuralism, he nevertheless synthesises many of the key features of the latter into his analysis in order to assist in his conceptualisation the new postmodern condition. Douglas Kellner has noted how Jameson constructs his theory of the postmodern using the terminology and the vocabulary of New French theory, utilising concepts such as 'simulacrum' (after

⁵⁰ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 71.

⁵¹ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 71.

Deleuze and Baudrillard), 'schizophrenic' (after Lacan and Deleuze/Guattari), and, 'intensities' and 'sublime' (after Lyotard).⁵² However, Jameson's work differs from that of the postmodernists by his attempt to delineate the epistemological and political issues of postmodernism. His achievement here is twofold. Firstly, in terms of postmodernism, he moves it out of the domain of aesthetic and cultural theory, and into the realm of social and political theory. Secondly, in terms of Marxist theory, he develops for the first time a theory of the 'cultural logic' of capital that also represents the transformations of the social form as a whole.⁵³

Jameson's work on postmodernism extends the Western Marxist tradition significantly beyond its inherited US-European axis, creating, for the first time, a truly geo-political aesthetic. As Anderson has commented, the work of the major Western Marxist thinkers had never moved far beyond Europe in terms of intellectual influence. Western Marxism's 'radius of influence remained limited to the original core of the advanced capitalist world: Western not only in its origins and themes, but also its impact'.⁵⁴ Jameson's work on postmodernism transcends these previous limitations. His initial formulations were based primarily on North America, but as his thesis developed, its implications widened. For Jameson, postmodernism was the 'cultural logic' of a capitalism that was global or multinational in its influence and, therefore, it demanded a major shift in Jameson's own field of enquiry. The focus of his previous work was almost exclusively literary and Western in focus; Balzac, Conrad, Dickens, Hemingway, Flaubert and Proust were the writers that commanded his attention. In the 1980s, with the development of his work on postmodernism, visual art forms, in particular film and

⁵² Kellner, 'Jameson, Marxism, Postmodernism', 24.

⁵³ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 72.

⁵⁴ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 74.

video, begin to compete with the written, and he begins to engage with cultures and geographical regions beyond Europe and North America. As Anderson notes: 'In this period, Jameson was to reflect on Soseki and Karatani in Japan; Lu Xun and Lao She in China; Sembène in Senegal and Sola or Barnet in Cuba; Edward Yang of Taiwan and Kidlak Tahimik of the Philippines.'⁵⁵

Finally, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, escapes what Anderson calls the 'historical pessimism' that has characterised much of Western Marxism from Lukács's destruction of reason, to Benjamin's angel of catastrophe and Adorno's damaged subject.⁵⁶ Jameson's insistence on utilising the Marxist/Hegelian dialectic method allows him to confront and address the complexities of the modern age without resorting to despondent pessimism or naïve optimism. That said, Jameson's work is marked, as many critics have noted, by an irrepressible sense of utopian longing, or what Anderson terms 'the subterranean persistence of the will to change'.⁵⁷ Jameson recognised that postmodernism was both a political and an aesthetic problem and that adopting a position on postmodernism also meant adopting a particular version of history:

Indeed, the very enabling premise of the debate turns on an initial, strategic, presupposition about our social system: to grant some historic originality to a

⁵⁵ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 75. This shift in Jameson towards a geopolitical aesthetic is evident in almost all of his writing in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992 he published a collection called *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (London: Verso, 1992) which contains discussions of the films of Paul Leduc, the Mexican director of a silent movie set in Venezuela and Souleymane Cissé from Mali. In 1986 he published a highly controversial article 'Third World Literature in the era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text* (Fall, 1986), 65-88. Jameson's effort to extend his critical analysis beyond the narrow focus of Western Marxism was not without controversy. He was subjected to a severe critique by the Indian Marxist Aijaz Ahmad. See Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory' *Social Text* 17 (1987), 3-26.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 76.

⁵⁷ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 77. See also Michael Sprinker, 'The Place of Theory', *New Left Review* Vol. 1, No. 187 (May-June 1991), 139-42. See also Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).

postmodernist culture is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and earlier moments of the capitalism from which it emerged.⁵⁸

In other words, in order to take a position on postmodernism, one must first adopt a position on the modernism that preceded it, and the nature of the relationship between these two movements.

4.4 The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism

Jameson takes the familiar Marxist concept that specific formal and aesthetic tendencies can be correlated to particular historical stages. He draws on the Mandellian periodisation of market, monopoly and late capitalism and correlates this with the aesthetic moments of realism, modernism and postmodernism respectively.⁵⁹ Each aesthetic moment, Jameson contends, will not only be seen to presuppose a particular economic stage of development but also a specific conception of the subject.

For Jameson, the 1960s symbolised the break that allowed us to define the difference between modernism and postmodernism. This period marked the moment when the institutionalisation of a previously unacceptable modernism occurred. Indeed, Jameson utilises the language of the 1960s to advance his argument when he writes of postmodernism as ‘the bad trip’ of the 1960s Utopian project and of ‘the sixties gone toxic’.⁶⁰ The 1960s also represented, he argues, one of the last moments when a modernist culture was still possible. However, it also represented a point of contradiction, as this was the very moment that signalled the end of modernism’s

⁵⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 55.

⁵⁹ See Michael Walsh, ‘Jameson and “Global Aesthetics,”’ in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 482.

⁶⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late capitalism*, 117.

culturally dominant position and the emergence of postmodernism.⁶¹ For Jameson, the potentially political urge of postmodernism is co-opted in much the same way that the political impulse of modernism is diffused and eventually institutionalised. He argues that 'if postmodernism is the substitute for the sixties and the compensation for their political failure, the question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all.'⁶² However, change is the one thing that postmodernism can no longer imagine because aesthetic production has been subsumed by commodity production and the modernist aesthetics of affect and, hence, of political effect, are no longer possible:

In the wholly built and constructed universe of late capitalism, from which nature has at last been effectively abolished and in which human praxis – in the degraded forms of information, manipulation, and reification – has penetrated the older autonomous sphere of culture and even the Unconscious, the Utopia of a renewal of perception has no place to go.⁶³

Jameson's repeated criticism of postmodernism's tendency to integrate culture into commodity production may be seen to echo Lukács's reading of modernism and is further evidence of Jameson's debt to Lukács.⁶⁴ Because postmodernism has colonised

⁶¹ John, N. Duvall, 'Troping History: Modernist Residue in Fredric Jameson's Pastiche and Linda Hutcheon's Parody' *Style*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Fall 1999), 375.

⁶² Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xvi.

⁶³ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 121-22.

⁶⁴ See Cornel West, 'Ethics and Action in Fredric Jameson's Marxist Hermeneutics' in Jonathan Arac ed. *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), 122-44. The Utopian imagination has been an important part of Jameson's thinking since the publication of *The Political Unconscious* where he argues for the 'collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity' (19). Indeed, the conclusion of *The Political Unconscious*, titled 'The Dialectic of Ideology and Utopia' outlines a program for cultural analysis that goes beyond the negative hermeneutic of ideological demystification vis-à-vis texts in order simultaneously to decipher 'the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts', an ideal to which Jameson remains committed throughout his career (Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 296).

all of human life, even the Unconscious, what Jameson terms ‘the Utopia of a renewal of perception’ has no where to go.⁶⁵

For Jameson, modernism’s political project of defamiliarisation ‘with [its] familiar stress on the vocation of art to restimulate perception, to re-conquer a freshness of experience back from the habituate and reified numbness of everyday life in a fallen world’ is no longer viable. A range of theoretical formations – from the Surrealists to the Russian Formalists to phenomenology – may all be said to comprise this defamiliarising aesthetic, but he argues that ‘this remarkable aesthetic is today meaningless and must be admired as one of the most intense historical achievements of the cultural past (along with the Renaissance or the Greeks or the Tang dynasty).’⁶⁶ Although Jameson’s sympathies clearly lie with the lost modernist project, particularly because of its relationship to utopian thinking, he still categorises himself as a ‘relatively enthusiastic consumer of postmodernism’ which signals his shift from an emphasis on production to a stress on consumption.⁶⁷ He sets out a series of oppositions that clarify his distinction between modernism and postmodernism.

In order to clarify his distinction between modernism and postmodernism, Jameson draws on the earlier Adorno-Lukács debates on modernism and realism. Lambert Zuidervaart has argued that the Adorno-Lukács debate seemingly concerns the political merits of realism and modernism in twentieth-century literature. However, he suggests that if ‘read from the vantage point of Jameson’ the ‘debate also enacts a struggle over the position of the epistemic subject relative to the import of the literary

⁶⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 122.

⁶⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 121.

⁶⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late capitalism*, 298.

work'.⁶⁸ For Lukács, modernist literature is a bourgeois literature that is characterised by an ahistorical angst in the face of monopoly capitalism and therefore the modernist work provides 'negative knowledge' of sociohistorical reality. Adorno, by contrast, argues that modernist works are genuinely realistic in the sense that they provide a negative knowledge of socio-historical reality. He concludes that the modernist work possesses no world view at all.⁶⁹ Lukács's emphasis on worldview embodies the nineteenth-century expectation that meaning can ultimately be found in the subject's global outlook on life and society. Adorno rejects this position, and rejects any attempt to locate the ultimate source of meaning in the epistemic subject. What Jameson does in his work on postmodernism is to attempt to move beyond the realism-modernism debate and argue instead that consumer capitalism has rendered modern art innocuous.

While the modernist subject is defined by alienation, the postmodernism subject is characterised by a sense of schizophrenia. This expresses, for Jameson what he sees as the vastly increased tendency toward the dissolution of the subject in postmodernism.⁷⁰ In *The Political Unconscious* he had argued that 'personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present' and 'that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language . . . as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time'.⁷¹ For Jameson, postmodernism erases history and promotes a breakdown of the temporality necessary to focus the subject and 'make it a space of praxis'. Jameson's argument is different to that of the deconstructionists who maintain that the subject was already an 'ideological mirage'. As

⁶⁸ Lambert Zuidervaart, 'Realism, Modernism and the Empty Chair' in Kellner (ed), *Postmodernism / Jameson / Critique*, 206.

⁶⁹ See Georg Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and Class Struggle* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) and Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1983).

⁷⁰ Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 105.

⁷¹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 26-27.

Homer has pointed out, Jameson always understands the schizophrenic subject as an historically specific phenomenon.⁷²

For Jameson, both modernism and postmodernism attempt to respond to the demands of capitalism and modernisation, to constantly make new technologies that modify the mode of production. There is, however, a crucial difference: modernism is a cultural response to a condition of incomplete modernisation, while postmodernism is a response to the condition of complete modernisation. In incomplete modernisation, one could experience 'the New' within culture organically, but in the contemporary moment, with the complete modernisation of postmodernity, our relation to 'the New' is more formal.⁷³ Postmodernism represents the culture of pastiche; a culture that is marked by the 'complacent play of historical allusion'. Pastiche is sometimes confused with parody as both involve a sense of imitation and mimicry. However, an important distinction needs to be upheld: Parody possesses an 'ulterior motive', to mock a divergence from the conventional or the norm, while pastiche, is simply 'blank parody' or 'empty copy' with no sense of their being a convention or norm from which to deviate. Jameson writes:

In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of language and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody.⁷⁴

⁷² Homer, *Frederic Jameson*, 104-05.

⁷³ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 310.

⁷⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 65. See also Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Hutcheon argues that postmodernism

The great modernist individual styles have, he argues, been replaced by postmodernist codes. Hence, postmodernism is no longer capable of achieving the critical distance necessary for parody and ends up recombining previously articulated styles, creating pastiche not parody. This results in the aestheticisation of historical styles devoid of the political contradictions that those styles embodied at their particular moment. Jameson terms this a 'degraded historicism' which is intimately connected to postmodernity's reshaping of subjectivity.

While Jameson acknowledges that modernism often 'quoted' from other cultures and other historical moments, he insists that when it comes to postmodernism there is an important difference. Postmodern cultural texts do not just quote other cultures or historical moments; they incorporate them to the point where any sense of critical distance threatens to collapse. This is particularly true of the relationship between high and popular culture. Postmodernism is accused of collapsing the distinction between high and popular culture leading to the claim that postmodernism marks the 'death of the subject' and the end of individualism. Jameson suggests that 'the disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequences, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche'.⁷⁵ In one sense, this means the end of the private and unique vision which is said to have informed the aesthetic thinking and cultural practices of high modernism.

distinguishes itself from modernism in the way it 'takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement'. One of the ways it achieves this is through the use of parody. Hutcheon contends that: 'Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders'. Unlike Jameson, who considers such postmodern parody as a symptom of the age, one way in which we have lost our connection to the past and to effective political critique, Hutcheon argues that 'through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference'. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 93.

⁷⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 64.

But for Jameson, there are two ways of understanding this: the moment of individual style can be seen to be over or individualism can be viewed in poststructuralist terms as a myth or a construct. The answer, for Jameson, is unimportant, as both lead to the path of pastiche; 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum'.⁷⁶ Postmodern culture is a culture of quotations, a culture 'of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense'. As a culture of images and surfaces that are without 'latent' possibilities, it derives its hermeneutic force from other images, other surfaces and the interplay of intertextuality.⁷⁷ This results in what Jameson has termed 'the waning of affect'.⁷⁸ However, as Lawrence Grossberg has suggested, it is not that there has been a waning of affect, rather that there has been a separation between affect and meaning.⁷⁹

Jameson concludes that the features he highlights to distinguish postmodernity from modernity – our relation to the new, the shift from individual styles to codes, and the transition from the alienated to the schizophrenic subject – all mark the movement from monopoly to multinational capital. This conclusion also raises an important question for Jameson: if the modernist aesthetic, predicated on fresh perception, has lost its traction in postmodern conditions, what is to take its place? In order to address this question Jameson moves to the field of postmodern architecture and a study of the politics of space. He speaks of those who occupy the contemporary moment as a generation, quite literally, lost in space. He cites the elevators and escalators in the

⁷⁶ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', 115.

⁷⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 60.

⁷⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 61.

⁷⁹ Lawrence Grossberg, *It's a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics and Culture*, 92.

Bonaventure in Los Angeles as a key example:

Here the narrative stroll has been underscored, symbolized, reified, and replaced by a transportation machine which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own: and this is a dialectical intensification of the autoreferentiality of all modern culture, which tends to turn upon itself and designate its own cultural production as its content . . . The descent is dramatic enough, plummeting back down through the roof to splash down in the lake. What happens when you get there is something else, which can only be described as milling confusion, something like the vengeance this space takes on those who still try to walk through it. Given the absolute symmetry of the four towers, it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby.⁸⁰

If people are, literally, lost in a physical space that disorients them, the 'sharper dilemma', as Jameson terms it, then 'is the incapacity of [human] minds . . . to map the great global multinational and de-centered communicational network in which [they] find [them]selves caught as individual subjects'.⁸¹ Jameson's cognitive mapping is a call to artists and theorists to provide a sense of historical orientation vis-à-vis social structures and their development - to recover a meaningful history from postmodernism's degraded historicity.

One of the great ironies, Homer suggests, of Jameson's version of postmodernism is that even as he announces the death of modernism, of its critical distance and emancipatory hopes, he reinscribes those same modernist hopes in his own writing practice.⁸² In other words, Jameson's assertion of the death of the great modernist styles is undercut by his own resistance to pastiche. His own preference is for the high-culture modernist artifact rather than the postmodern sublime. His chapter on video, for

⁸⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 42-43.

⁸¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 44.

⁸² Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 94-95.

example, rather than examining the impact of MTV, focuses instead on a 1979 art school video that Jameson admits few of his readers will ever see. But his intelligent close reading of this video places his analysis back in the realm of the modernist valorisation of the work, a difficulty of which he seems to be unaware.⁸³ As we have seen, postmodernism for Jameson is more than just a particular cultural style, it is above all a ‘periodizing concept’, therefore, we must return to Jameson’s problematic category, ‘late capitalism’.

4.5 Jameson’s Periodisation of Late Capitalism

Jameson’s association of postmodernism with a particular phase of capitalist development is one of his most substantive contributions to the postmodern debate, but it is also the most problematic and critically contested aspect of his work. Jameson situates his theory of postmodernism within a periodising structure, arguing that ‘every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today’.⁸⁴ He further contends that ‘to grant some historical originality to a postmodernist culture is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and earlier moments of the capitalism from which it emerged’.⁸⁵ We can locate anticipations of this analysis in Jameson’s earlier work. He had already begun to develop such an analysis in his discussion of surrealism in *Marxism and Form* (1971), where he argued that the

⁸³ Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 230-32.

⁸⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 3. [Jameson’s emphasis]

⁸⁵ Jameson, ‘The Politics of Theory’, 103.

Surrealists' 'profane illuminations', their discovery of unconscious psychic investments in everyday objects, reflected, 'a not yet fully industrialised and systematised economy' where 'the human origins of the products of this period . . . have not yet been fully concealed'. Today, by contrast,

[i]n what we call postindustrial capitalism, the products with which we are furnished are utterly without depth: their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy . . . All libidinal investment in such objects is precluded from the outset, and, we may ask ourselves, if it is true that our object universe is henceforth unable to yield any 'symbol apt at stirring human sensibility' [Breton], whether we are not here at the presence of a cultural transformation of signal proportions, a historical break of an unexpectedly absolute kind.⁸⁶

This passage contains *in nuce* Jameson's most sustained analysis of the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. Postmodernism has become, he argues, a 'cultural dominant' where art produced under its sovereignty is characterised by a peculiar depthlessness which seems to drain it of any emotional content. Postmodernism celebrates the disintegration of the subject and offers instead mere pastiches of a historical past nostalgically reduced either to a lost world of political commitment or to a source of glossy retro-style images. The strange exhilaration of postmodern art can, therefore, be located in its inducement of a 'hysterical sublime', a response of excitement and terror provoked by the realisation that the workings of the global economic system can no longer be represented or imagined in any comprehensive or totalising manner.

⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 103-04, 105. Jameson's discussion of Surrealism can be seen to influence Anderson's development of his thesis on modernism in 'Modernity and Revolution', which was discussed in detail in Chapter One. See Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 95-196.

Jameson's conception of modernism is plotted in terms of his conception of modern economic history borrowed from Ernest Mandel. Mandel, who Jameson claims was the first Marxist to theorise a third stage of capitalism:

[T]here have been three fundamental moments in capitalism, each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage. These are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might be better termed multinational, capital.⁸⁷

Jameson borrows two important aspects of his system from Mandel; the periodisation of the stages of capitalism and the view that the later or 'third stage' of capitalism is a purer form of capitalism than the nineteenth-century version theorised by Marx in *Capital*.⁸⁸ For Jameson, Mandel's thesis of late or multinational does not contradict but confirms Marx's thesis: 'This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way'. Mandel's periodisation is based on a theory of 'Kondratiev cycles' or 'long waves', each wave developing approximately a fifty-year cycle and representing a dialectical expansion over the previous stage.⁸⁹ Capitalism has experienced four of these periods to date: the period from the end of the eighteenth century to 1847 (early capitalism), from the crisis of 1847 to the early 1890s (market capitalism), from the 1890s to the Second World War (monopoly capitalism) and, finally, from 1945 to the present moment (multinational capitalism). Each of these stages is defined by a form of corresponding

⁸⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 35. See also Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975). In his conclusion to *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson acknowledges the debt that he owes to Mandel's work: writing that Mandel's *Late Capitalism* 'is what made my own thoughts on "postmodernism" possible, and they are therefore to be understood as an attempt to theorise the specific logic of the cultural production of that third stage' (Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 400).

⁸⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 3.

⁸⁹ See Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, Chapter 4.

technology: the introduction of mechanisation characterised early capitalist development; the introduction of the steam engine was particular to market capitalism; the development of electricity and automobiles was essential to monopoly capitalism; the generalised use of computers and nuclear technology is distinctive to contemporary multinational moment:

The fundamental revolutions in power technology – the technology of the production of motive machines by machines – thus appears as the determinant moment in revolutions of technology as a whole. Machine production of steam-driven motors since 1848; machine production of electronic and combustion motors since the 90s of the 19th century; machine production of electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses since the 40s of the 20th century – these are the three general revolutions in technology engendered by the capitalist mode of production since the “original” industrial revolution of the later 18th century.⁹⁰

To Mandel’s tripartite analogy of production, Jameson attaches his own cultural periodisation. He contends that one can locate a ‘cultural dominant’ within each stage of capitalist economic expansion: realism is associated with market capitalism, modernism with capitalist imperial expansion, and postmodernism corresponds to multinational capital.

In *Marxism and Form* Jameson had argued, drawing on the economic theories of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, that it was ‘postindustrial monopoly capitalism’ that was the dominant economic system of the West since the 1940s and which was responsible for the depthless, affectless nature of cultural products.⁹¹ However, by the early 1980s Jameson repudiated this notion of ‘postindustrial society’ and advocated instead that the

⁹⁰ Mandel, *Late Capitalism* cited in Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 35.

⁹¹ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, xvii-xviii. See Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968).

moment of change be relocated to around 'the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s'. It was also at this point in his work that Jameson began to utilise Mandel's theory of late-capitalism as a stage beyond the monopoly era. However, as several commentators, even those generally sympathetic to Jameson's thesis, have pointed out, his use of Mandel's *Late Capitalism* as an economic model to support his own system of cultural periodisation is problematic.

Mike Davis contends that Jameson's periodisation actually conflicts with that used by Mandel whose 'central purpose [in *Late Capitalism*] is to understand "the long post-war wave of rapid growth"', and who 'regards the real break, the definite ending of the long wave, to be the "Second slump" of 1974-75'.⁹² Jameson located a fundamental break in the cultural habitus in the early 1960s and early 1970s, but Mandel's study *Late Capitalism* attempts to understand the long post-war boom beginning in the late-1940s. Davis also argues that it was Mandel's subsequent study *The Second Slump* that addressed the crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this later book, Mandel argues that the crisis of the post-war late-capitalist boom, and not its onset, can be located in the worldwide economic slump of 1974-75.⁹³ Jameson locates this moment of crisis much later, arguing that 1967-73 is the watershed moment for the emergence of postmodern or late capitalism. These important differences between Jameson's and Mandel's schemes are crucial and pose a number of important questions: Did 'late capitalism' begin, as Mandel suggests, *circa* 1945 or as Jameson suggests, *circa* the late 1960s? Are the sixties the beginning of a new epoch or merely the superheated summit of the post-war

⁹² Mike Davis, 'Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism', *New Left Review* 1.151 (1985), 106.

⁹³ See Ernest Mandel, *The Second Slump: A Marxist Analysis of Recession in the Seventies* (London: New Left Books, 1978).

boom? Where does the slump fit into an accounting of contemporary cultural trends?⁹⁴ Answering these questions, allows us to go a long way in determining the success or failure of Jameson's account of postmodernism.

The difficulty with Jameson's argument at this point is that he does not comment enough on the nature of 'multinational capitalism' to sustain much serious discussion of these questions. Secondly, while he relies heavily on the work of Mandel, he does not account for the discrepancy between his periodisation and Mandel's. As we have seen, Mandel locates the beginning of the period of late capitalism in the aftermath of the Second World War. Mandel has also argued that within each of these 'long waves' there are a number of ebbs and flows or 'business cycles' which reflect what is commonly referred to as boom-bust cycles. The 1973 oil-crisis and subsequent world recession would be one such example. Therefore, as Homer suggests, '[t]his raises the question for Mandel, of whether or not "a new long wave can be predicted from the second half of the 1960s onwards – the ebb after the flow"'. Homer also argues that this highlights a further difficulty with Jameson's work because he periodises postmodernism in two ways. Firstly, Jameson defines the postmodern period as 'the period post-Second World War', which suggests an identification with Mandel's periodisation, and secondly, he locates it in 'the moment emerging from the late 1960s and early 1970s', which can be identified with Mandel's 'second phase of decelerated accumulation and the possibility a new long wave'.⁹⁵ Jameson does attempt to clarify this point arguing that 'the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism' was 'strengthened by a generational

⁹⁴ Davis, 'Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism', 106-7.

⁹⁵ Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 108-09.

rupture' and 'achieved more properly in the 1960s'.⁹⁶ However, he also repeatedly insists on the fact that his 'approach to postmodernism is a "totalizing" one'. Jameson argues that:

when one is immersed in the immediate . . . the abrupt distance afforded by an abstract concept, a more global characterisation of the secret affinities between those apparently autonomous and unrelated domains . . . is a unique resource, particularly since the history of the preceding few years is always what is least accessible to us.⁹⁷

Therein, lies the central difficulty with Jameson's position. He argues that the 'semi-autonomy' of all social levels must be respected – the economic, the psychic, and the cultural, as well as the non-synchronicity between levels. As Homer has argued, this raises the key question that remains unanswered in Jameson's thesis: if postmodernism is a totalising theory, how does he achieve the non-synchronicity that this periodisation requires?⁹⁸

So, why is the question of periodisation so important to Jameson's thesis on postmodernism? As we have just seen postmodernism is, for Jameson, more than just a particular style, it is above all a 'periodizing concept' and postmodernism is the 'cultural dominate' of late-capitalism. Implicit in this claim is Jameson's thesis that postmodernism is a hopelessly commercial culture. Unlike modernism, which taunted the commercial culture of capitalism, postmodernism, rather than resisting, 'replicates and reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism'.⁹⁹ Therefore, Jameson argues, postmodern culture 'does more than simply replicate the logic of late-capitalism;

⁹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xx.

⁹⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 400.

⁹⁸ Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 109.

⁹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 125.

it reinforces and intensifies it.¹⁰⁰ It forms the principal part of a process in which aesthetic production becomes integrated into commodity production. Culture can now no-longer be understood ideologically, concealing the economic activities of capitalist society; culture is itself an economic activity and perhaps the most important economic activity of all.

4.6 Marxist Responses to Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

With the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, postmodernism came to be associated with a critique of knowledge and of the 'meta-narratives' used throughout the arts and sciences to explain and represent reality. One of the many targets of postmodernism's critique is Marxism, with its claims to historical development, to transcendent consciousness, to assertions of true versus false consciousness and its loyalty to the origin, subjects and meaning of history. The postmodern critique of these master narratives for organising information and its vision of political change has set Marxism up in many ways as the standard for understanding what postmodernism is not. Postmodernism rejects the narrative of a coherent social order and the coherent subjects required to change it. Instead, postmodernism argues that there is no directly accessible material reality that underlines any particular social order. While Fredric Jameson's Marxist intervention into the postmodern debate is widely considered to be the most significant, it was not the only important contribution. I want to briefly consider two other significant Marxist accounts of postmodernism; David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) and Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996).

¹⁰⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 85.

Both writers explicitly and implicitly respond to Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

David Harvey's analysis of postmodernism in *The Condition of Postmodernity* is clearly indebted to Jameson. He, like Jameson, attempts to offer a totalising explanation for the cultural shift towards postmodernism. He argues that 1972, the year of the oil crisis, represented a change, not only in political-economic practices, but in cultural practice as well. He contends that this sea-change is connected to the 'emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time'.¹⁰¹ The 'shifting dimensions of time and space' within postmodernist cultural forms suggest that there is a connection between 'the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation' and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the organisation of capitalism. However, Harvey concludes that these changes, when set against the basic rules of capitalistic accumulation, appear more as shifts in surface appearance than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society.¹⁰²

Harvey's work offers an alternative explanation of the transition from modernism to postmodernism to that of Jameson. It explores the question in the context of 'historical-geographical materialism' and offers an ambitious reconstruction of Marx's entire theory of capitalist development. Central to Harvey's work is the spatialisation of capital. He develops Marx's suggestion in *Grundrisse* that 'while capital must on the one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse . . . exchange and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this

¹⁰¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, v.

¹⁰² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, viii.

space with time'.¹⁰³ Harvey shares Jameson's position that a number of key structural economic transformations occurred within capitalism after the Second World War. He also concurs with Jameson's view that these changes do not represent a fundamental break in the nature of capitalism. Finally, Harvey also concludes that the oil crisis was an important moment in the emergence of postmodernism. He argues that 'somewhere between 1968 and 1972' it became apparent that postmodernism emerged as 'a full-blown though still incoherent movement out of the chrysalis of the anti-modern movement of the 1960s'.¹⁰⁴ It began to be defined in opposition to modernism, in that it sought 'to integrate into popular culture through the kind of frank, even crass, commercialization that modernists tended to eschew by their deep resistance to the idea (though never quite the fact) of commodification of their production'.¹⁰⁵ Harvey, like Jameson, stresses the material origins of this shift towards postmodernism, arguing that 'it [is] important to accept the proposition that the cultural evolution which has taken place since the early 1960s, and which asserted itself as hegemonic in the early 1970s, has not occurred in a social, economic, or political vacuum.' Postmodernism is not an 'autonomous artistic current'; rather, it is rooted in everyday life, and this becomes one of its most palpable and observable characteristics.¹⁰⁶

Where Harvey differs from Jameson is in his analysis of the economic preconditions for postmodernism. Jameson locates it in the pre-1970s economic boom, while Harvey insists that its origins are to be found in monetarist policies of Thatcherism and Reaganism and the completion of the transition from Fordism to more flexible

¹⁰³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin 1973), 539.

¹⁰⁴ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 38.

¹⁰⁵ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 62.

¹⁰⁶ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 62.

modes of capital accumulation. In other words, for Harvey, the condition of postmodernism is not to be found in the extension of long waves of capitalist reproduction but rather in a change in the nature of capital accumulation. The old Fordist system which was, Harvey argues, a rigid and fixed system of accumulation gives way to a more 'flexible' system of accumulation. Thus, as Homer has pointed out, Harvey's understanding of postmodernism is connected 'with the ebb rather than the flow of Mandel's latest long wave'.¹⁰⁷ As Harvey argues:

The transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation, such as it has been, ought to imply a transition in our mental maps, political attitudes, and political institutions. But political thinking does not necessarily undergo such easy transformations, and is in any case subject to the contradictory pressures that derive from spatial integration and differentiation. There is an omnipresent danger that our mental maps will not map current realities. The serious diminution of the power of individual nation states over fiscal and monetary policies, for example, has not been matched by any parallel shift towards an internationalization of politics.¹⁰⁸

This is an important distinction because it correctly suggests that postmodernism is a more limited phenomenon than Jameson's analysis would seem to suggest, and its position as a 'global' cultural phenomenon is questionable.

Terry Eagleton's *Illusions of Postmodernity*, like both Jameson and Harvey, sees postmodernism emerging in a late phase of global capitalism.¹⁰⁹ For Eagleton, the modernism that preceded it was driven by a dynamic phase of capitalist technology, of which futurism and constructivism were the logical cultural forms. He argues that the celebratory utopian spirit that accompanies the international circulation of commodities

¹⁰⁷ Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 109.

¹⁰⁸ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 305-06.

¹⁰⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

had its counterpart in the modernist circulation of ‘tongues, myths and identities’.¹¹⁰ Eagleton’s critique of postmodernism is of a different character to that of Jameson. *The Illusion of Postmodernism* is an ethical condemnation of postmodernism, addressing what Eagleton feels are its ethical and political deficiencies. He is committed to the more progressive elements in modernism and this commitment forms the basis of his critique of postmodernism.

Eagleton takes issue with Jameson’s notion of parody, rejecting the idea that postmodernism is characterised by this imitation of dead styles, pure ‘*simulacrum*’ or identical copy without source. Instead, Eagleton contends that if postmodernism parodies anything, it is parodying, in the form of a sick joke, the serious attempts by the revolutionary avant-garde of the 1930s to dismantle the frontiers between art (as institution) and life (as social praxis). This, he suggests, represents an ultimate irony in that postmodernism achieves this crossover in a way which would have horrified the early practitioners of modernism.¹¹¹ Instead of either resisting commodification in the way that modernism did by withdrawing into self-reflexive isolation, or, passing over into revolutionary social praxis in the ways proposed by the avant-garde, the postmodern artifact sweeps away this opposition by ‘discovering’ that, since the whole social sphere has already been commodified and aestheticised, it should surrender all claims to a separate status and simply ‘copy the copy’. In other words, it must become one more commodity or stereotype, a ‘*simulacrum*’, a copy of the copy for which there never was any ‘original’. In the context of the modernism of the 1930s this may have carried some revolutionary potential or anti-representational power, but with postmodernism this

¹¹⁰ Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 60.

¹¹¹ Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 63.

collapses into mere tautology and compulsive repetition. As Eagleton writes, 'if art no longer reflects, it is not because it seeks to change the world rather than mimic it, but because there is in truth nothing there to be reflected, no reality which is not itself already image, spectacle, simulacrum, gratuitous fiction'.¹¹² Eagleton's analysis focuses on the political character of postmodernism and on how the various arguments over the political 'effectiveness' of postmodern artifacts turn on whether or not any critical stance is maintained in the conflation of artifact and commodity/stereotype, of which Andy Warhol's reproduced images of Marilyn Monroe, fetishised women's shoes or Campbell's soup cans have themselves become the stereotypical examples.¹¹³

It is arguable that Jameson's own definition of the modernist sublime implies a notion of the aesthetic that is inherently political. The desire to dissolve art into life helps to explain why the artistic avant-gardes were so often attracted to various political vanguards in the early decades of the twentieth century. Modernist abstraction was not simply a passive reflection of the money-form; it could just as easily be deployed against capitalism. The surrealists felt it was necessary to deconstruct the visual and conceptual categories of bourgeois society in order to unleash the repressed libidinal energies of the working class. Art and life could be reunited through the intoxicating surge of revolution.¹¹⁴ Eagleton contends, however, that the aspiration to reclaim the aesthetic as an inherent dimension of human experience is also to affirm what he terms 'the political critique implicit in our species being' and 'the desire to dissolve art into life necessarily implicates the ethical and political claims of socialism'.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 62.

¹¹³ For an alternative account of postmodernism see Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

¹¹⁴ Colin Moore, 'Review: Fredric Jameson's *The Cultural Turn*', *Cultural Logic*, 3.1 (Fall 1999).

¹¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 100.

4.7 Conclusion

Jameson, Harvey and Eagleton have all demonstrated unwavering intellectual and political commitment to Marxism, a commitment that they have pursued in defiance of changing academic fashions. All three have written influential interpretations of postmodernism that have argued for postmodernism to be understood as representative of a larger historical process. Jameson and Harvey share a common method. For Jameson, postmodernism is 'the cultural logic of late-capitalism', and Harvey's concept of 'cultural clothing' is clearly indebted to Jameson. However, whereas Jameson draws on the work of Mandel to explain the postmodern shift, Harvey conceives of postmodern culture as a reflection of a new regime of 'flexible accumulation' and 'its attendant mode of regulation'. These different inflections aside, both offer writers offer restatements of the classical Marxist 'base-superstructure' analysis. Marx argued that 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general'. It is the economic structures of society that represent 'the real foundation, on which arise a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness'.¹¹⁶

Both writers also focus on the question of space. Jameson argues that with postmodernism we become 'bereft of spatial co-ordinates'. Though the 'postmodern hyperspace' 'has moved the closest to the surface of our consciousness, as a coherent new type of space in its own right', it no longer possesses the 'capacity for representation'.¹¹⁷ Being unarticulated as place, lacking the ability to create familiar or ordinary relationships, this new space forms the basis of a postmodern or 'hysterical

¹¹⁶ Karl Marx, 'Preface', *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1981), 7.

¹¹⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*, 49, 46, 44.

sublime'.¹¹⁸ This new experience of global space is characterised by the loss of control over the spatial environment which, Jameson contends, leads to physical and mental disorientation, symbolised by the 'incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multi-national and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects'.¹¹⁹ It is unclear here whether Jameson is optimistic or pessimistic about the consequences of the postmodern condition. While Harvey's analysis of urban space offers little hope for the combination of social and aesthetic goals, Jameson calls for the creation of a 'new political art' that 'will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping and will achieve 'a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last [the world space of multinational capital]'.¹²⁰ Harvey, on the other hand, sees little evidence that Jameson's utopian longing can ever be realised. He argues that 'the postmodernists see space as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principals which have nothing necessarily to do with an overarching social objective'.¹²¹

Jameson's great achievement in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism* is the creation of a marriage of aesthetic and economic concerns to achieve a powerful totalisation of postmodern culture. Eagleton, unlike Jameson, distinguishes between postmodernism understood as a development in the arts and postmodernism as a political ideology. His focus is primarily with the latter. Both situate the ideology of postmodernism historically, but Eagleton sees it as the product of political defeat – a

¹¹⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*, 29.

¹¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*, 44.

¹²⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*, 54.

¹²¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 296.

‘definitive repulse’.¹²² Jameson’s intention is to offer a cognitive map of postmodernism rather than to adjudicate it. He consistently warns against an easy denunciation of postmodernism and stresses the dangers of sterile moralism. This could be taken as a kind of rebuke to projects such as Eagleton’s. Therefore, Jameson’s work contains no sustained attack on any specific body of postmodernist work or movements. His approach may allow for a more nuanced overview of the cultural landscape but one of the downsides of Jameson’s approach is that it is difficult to find a place for the political in his account of postmodernism. As Anderson notes, by positioning the postmodern between aesthetics and economics, Jameson misses ‘a sense of culture as a battlefield that divides protagonists. That is the plane of politics understood as a space in its own right.’¹²³ When Jameson first began writing about postmodernism in the early 1980s the politics of Reagan and Thatcher dominated the Western hemisphere. By 1991, when he had finished writing *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Communism had collapsed and global capitalism appeared to move unchallenged across the globe. In Jameson’s later work, the term ‘postmodernism’ increasingly gives way to the word ‘globalisation’ but the overall ambition of his project remains the same: to produce a materialist account of cultural production in an historical moment when most forms of progressive opposition to capitalism appear to be disorientated, indeed in disarray.¹²⁴

¹²² Eagleton, *The Illusion of Postmodernity*, 1.

¹²³ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 134.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Fredric Jameson, ‘Globalization and Political Strategy’ *New Left Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (July-August, 2000), 49-68 and Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (eds.), *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

CHAPTER FIVE

Repudiation and Reconciliation: Ireland as Case Study of Changing Marxist Engagements with Modernism

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1 Introduction

The Marxist debates that we have reviewed thus far all deal with modernism in general. The Marxist discussions of modernism and the city, modernism and imperialism, the decline of the modernist avant-gardes, or the waning of modernism and the emergence of postmodernism, all share in common a tendency to speak of modernism in the abstract – scarcely any of these debates focus on modernism in specific national or localised situations. On the one hand, this makes for sweeping panoramic discussions that can be tremendously rich and suggestive; on the other hand, it can also lead to large generalisations and abstractions, to a loss of historical specificity, or to a disregard for the concrete material context that is supposed to be the hallmark of the Marxist mode of analysis.

In this final chapter I want to shift focus from a consideration of Marxist analyses of modernism in general to an examination of Marxian engagements with modernism in a particular instance, namely Ireland. As will be obvious from previous chapters, Irish modernism has already featured in interesting ways in some of the debates already reviewed. Examples include Fredric Jameson's rereading of *Ulysses* in terms of his conceptualisation of the relationship between Marxism and imperialism or Terry Eagleton's discussion of the role of exilic Irish and American writers in the

elaboration of Anglophone modernism in *Exiles and Émigrés*.¹ However, while the major Irish modernists such as James Joyce or Samuel Beckett obviously feature quite commonly in contemporary Marxist debates on modernism and postmodernism, the Irish historical context from which Joyce or Beckett emerged does not loom large in Marxist or left-leaning criticism generally. Jameson's analysis of *Ulysses* in 'Modernism and Imperialism', Edward Said's discussion of Yeats as the exemplary postcolonial national poet in 'Yeats and Decolonization', or Franco Moretti's argument in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, that Joyce's Dublin must effectively be regarded as a British and not an Irish city, can all be faulted for a lack of historical detail and nuance, and for displaying a fairly rudimentary grasp of the complexities of Irish history.²

More recently, however, there have been some attempts to produce more historically-rooted and more fully contextualised analyses of Irish modernism from a Marxist or Marxian-postcolonial standpoint. The groundbreaking study of this kind is surely Terry Eagleton's 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', which constitutes one of the key chapters in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*.³ Eagleton's work has produced a number of responses from Irish critics, including a rather critical review essay in *Bullán* by David Lloyd, but also a more positive survey essay by Joe Cleary in *boundary 2* that draws on the work of Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson to

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970).

² Fredric Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism* (Derry: Field Day, 1988). Edward Said *Yeats and Decolonization* (Derry: Field Day, 1988). Franco Moretti, 'The Long Goodbye: *Ulysses* and the End of Liberal Capitalism', in *Signs Taken for Wonders* [Revised edition] Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller, trans., (London: Verso, 1997), 182-208. The essay first appeared in *Studi Inglesi*, 3-4, 1976-77 but did not appear in an English translation until 1983 when it was included in *Signs Taken for Wonders*. See also, John Xiros Cooper, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Cultures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

³ Terry Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde,' *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995).

reconceptualise Irish modernism in ways that broadly concur with Eagleton, but which also rework some of the latter's arguments in new directions.⁴ Eagleton's essay 'The Archaic Avant-Garde' is given priority in this chapter, not only because Eagleton is one of the few critics to offer a Marxist reading of Irish modernism, but because in this essay we can see a merging of the broader Marxian interests reviewed in previous chapters along with a concern for the specificity of the Irish historical context notably absent in most Anglophone Marxism. In his discussion of Irish modernism, Eagleton brings together issues that we have been discussing throughout this dissertation, including the relationship modernism and imperialism, the question of modernism and uneven development, and the affiliation between high modernism and the continental avant-gardes. Most importantly, in relation to this chapter and the history of Marxist criticism on modernism, he attempts to synthesise a Lukácsian scepticism about modernism with an Adornean appreciation of modernism's desperate attempt to safeguard the autonomy of art from the ravages of commodification and its submission to the instrumental reason of either right or left. Therefore, Eagleton's 'The Archaic Avant-Garde' may be seen to be typical of late-twentieth-century leftist works that try more generally to find some middle ground between Lukács and Adorno.

Ireland is an interesting case for discussions of modernism because the country produced an extensive high modernist literature, yet it seems not to conform to many of the more classical Marxist conceptions of modernism which associate the latter with the European metropolises, new technologies or radical revolution. Given that modernism is conventionally associated with advanced capitalist societies, Ireland seems to be an

⁴ Joe Cleary, 'Towards a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature', *boundary 2* Vol. 31 No. 1 (Spring 2004). David Lloyd, 'Cultural Theory and Ireland' (A Review of Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*) *Bullán* Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring 1997), 87-91.

unlikely place to have produced such a highly successful modernist literary culture. Therefore, this chapter aims to accomplish two things. Firstly, it will examine the reception by Marxist critics of two key modernist Irish writers, Joyce and Beckett. Secondly, it will consider how more recent Marxist criticism, exemplified here by Eagleton, has attempted to make sense of a modernism that seems so aberrant.

In order to assess the merits of Eagleton's attempt to produce a detailed Marxian analysis of Irish modernism I want to begin by situating his work in the wider context of Marxian engagements with Ireland's leading modernists, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. On the whole, as we will see, Marxian criticism of these writers broadly divided into camps: on one side, a strident dismissal of modernism as a sign of bourgeois decadence, exemplified by the Soviet denunciation of Joyce's *Ulysses* and by Georg Lukács's critique of the stream of consciousness technique in the 1930s; on the other side, an enthusiastic embrace of modernism as an exemplary response to the condition of twentieth-century modernity, exemplified by Theodor Adorno's famous essay on Samuel Beckett 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*'.⁵ Obviously, the Soviet denunciation of Joyce and Adorno's embrace of Beckett do not represent the entire gamut of left-wing responses to Irish modernism. They do, however, represent the rough contours of that response and as such they document a wider shift in Marxist responses to modernism from the 1920s to the 1980s – a shift from a broadly hostile denunciation of modernism to an enthusiastic embrace of modernism as the most exemplary radical art form in modern times.

⁵ Theodor Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', Michael T. Jones, trans. *New German Critique* 26 (Spring–Summer 1982), 119-50.

The Soviet debates on Joyce and Adorno's discussion of Beckett may appear on first reading to be diametrically opposed. However, what they both share is a lack of interest in Joyce or Beckett as Irish writers, ignoring the fact that both writers emerged from a specific national history and literary tradition. It would not be until the 1980s, with the development of postcolonial theory, that a body of left-leaning critics including Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, Luke Gibbons, and Emer Nolan, began to resituate the work of Joyce, in particular, and Beckett, to a lesser extent, in an Irish context. When Terry Eagleton published *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* this represented the first major attempt by a Marxist critic of international stature to synthesise this growing body of Irish literary criticism with the concerns of those versions of contemporary Anglophone Marxism that we have been reviewing in earlier chapters.⁶ Beginning with earlier Marxist treatments of Joyce and Beckett, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of how Eagleton begins to synthesise Irish postcolonial and Anglophone Marxist treatments of modernism in Ireland.

5.2 Joyce and Early Marxist Literary Criticism

The 1920s saw the beginnings of a serious Marxist engagement with the question of modernism and the work of Irish writer James Joyce was to play an important role within these debates. This section will consider a number of Marxist engagements with Joyce's work, up to the Second World War (1945). Following the defeat of proletarian revolutions in Russia and Germany (1918-1923), and the rise of Fascism in the 1930s, both occurring under what were generally considered to be 'advanced' economic and

⁶ Neither Jameson's 'Modernism and Imperialism', nor Moretti's 'Ulysses and End of Liberal Capitalism' allude to any Irish critics, while Said's 'Yeats and Decolonization' alludes only to the work of Seamus Deane.

political conditions, traditional Marxism experienced a type of existential crisis. As we saw in Chapter Three, the bohemian and aristocratic nature of much of the cultural avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth-century often precluded any significant engagement with proletarian mass movements; the avant-garde devoted much of its attention to combating the commodification of high culture, not to the cultural conditions of the working class. As a result, avant-garde politics tended to be libertarian or anarchist in character. On the other hand, the Second International (1889-1914), with its rigidly deterministic and optimistic outlook, expressed contempt for anything that might convey social pessimism or acute aesthetic self-consciousness, and as such was poorly equipped to address contemporary modernist currents in these arts. The consolidation of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the decreasing role of a European-orientated intelligentsia in Soviet politics and cultural debate, the rise of many ex-peasants in the Soviet Communist Party by the 1930s, and the mobilisation of the whole country for rapid industrialisation after 1928, all contributed to the end of the relatively open and intensely experimental aesthetic period that followed the 1917 Revolution.⁷ The doctrine of 'socialist realism' announced in 1934, and rigidly enforced thereafter, meant that works of art were judged more on their political content than their aesthetic sensibility. The central stress on creating optimistic, positive 'heroes' meant that instead of continuing in the steps of nineteenth-century realism – with its uncovering of disturbing aspects of social reality in a critical and ironic manner – 'socialist realism' prescribed a prosaic naturalist description of everyday life, described as the 'truthful

⁷ Robert A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920's* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2002). See Chapter One.

historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development'.⁸ Cultural developments associated with Western modernism were attacked as 'decadent' and 'formalist'.

This dismissal of modernist culture in the name of Soviet Communism reached its peak just a few years after the promising experiments of the cultural left in both artistic practice and critical analysis. As Eugene Lunn has argued, both of these developments, the post-First World War beginnings of a Marxist reception of modernism and the straitjacketing of Communist culture which followed, were part of the background of the immensely fruitful aesthetic debates among German exilic intellectuals after 1933, in particular the Lukács-Brecht debates and the Benjamin-Adorno debates.⁹ These debates raised crucial questions about the role of art in society with all four theorists stressing, in different ways, that modernism needed to be understood in relation to capitalist economy and society, and, more broadly, needed to be conceived of historically, even if many of its practitioners seemed to favour mythic rather than materialist conceptions of history. An examination of the reception of Joyce's *Ulysses* in the 1920s and 1930s provides an interesting and useful context in which to examine the early modernist-Marxist debates.

Criticism of Joyce from a socialist perspective was generally rare anywhere in the first five decades following the publication of *Ulysses*. After an initial flurry of activity in the 1930s, further work was uncommon until the 1980s, when interest in recuperating a political Joyce began to flourish, especially in France and particularly in

⁸ See John Berger, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny, Endurance, and the Role of the Artist* (London: Vintage, 1998), 47-63, and Boris Thompson, *The Premature Revolution: Russian Literature and Society 1917-1946* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 223-34.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977).

relation to *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's refusal to become even minimally involved in the great European political debates of the 1930s seems to have been instrumental in promoting the view that Joycean texts were, like their author, apolitical. Political responses to Joyce was initially sporadic.¹⁰ The publication of *Dubliners* (June 1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (December 1916) made little impression on a public whose attention were focused on the slaughter in Europe. Political readings that suggested that these texts could offer an insight into the crisis afflicting much of Europe did not arise in the contemporary criticism of the time. However, with the publication of *Ulysses* in 1922, Joyce quickly found himself, albeit indirectly, at the centre of Marxist debates on modernism, particularly in the Soviet Union. Several leading Russian artists and intellectuals initially championed Joyce's work. Sergei Eisenstein, Vladimir Nabokov and Vsevolod Vishnevsky visited or met Joyce in Paris in the 1930s, while Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak and Yury Karlovich Olesha were some of his leading Russian admirers.¹¹

Sergei Eisenstein, in particular, was a huge admirer of Joyce. He met with Joyce in Paris in 1929 where he heard Joyce's recording of the 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' section of *Finnegans Wake* and discussed literature and film with him. Eisenstein was particularly interested in the Joycean approach to inner speech and fantasised about the prospect of putting an entire crowd into Red Square under a cinematic microscope in a

¹⁰ For a useful overview of the responses of Marxist literary theorists to Joyce see Jeremy Hawthorn, 'Ulysses, Modernism, and Marxist Criticism' in W. J. McCormack and Alistair Stead eds., *James Joyce and Modern Literature* (London: Routledge, 1982), 112-125.

¹¹ My examination of Joyce's reception in Russia in this section is based on that of British scholar Neil Cornwell's article 'Some Russian Attitudes to James Joyce' in *Irish-Russian Contacts: A Special Issue of Irish Slavonic Studies* (Belfast: Irish Slavonic Studies No. 5, 1985), 57-82, and on his book *James Joyce and the Russians* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992). I also draw on Emily Tall's, 'The Reception of James Joyce in Russia' in Geert Lernout and Wim Van Mierlo eds., *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe Vol 1: Germany, Northern and East Central Europe* (London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 244-257.

manner similar to what Joyce had done with Bloom in a literary context.¹² In an article entitled 'An American Tragedy', Eisenstein described the antipathy of Hollywood producers, who had wanted only a simple detective story, to a proposed production of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, in which the hero's crime would be linked to the brutal social conditions that had shaped him.¹³ Eisenstein argued that Dreiser's hero could be adequately represented only by utilising the techniques of visual and aural montage made possible by the development of new sound film technology. It is in this context that Eisenstein praised Joyce so highly. He saw *Ulysses* as an exemplary instance of literary montage techniques, but argued that the resulting 'internal monologue' (Eisenstein's term) is best realised in film. Eisenstein's enthusiasm for the 'internal monologue' as a technical device is supported by a crucial theoretical insight. Although it attempts to reproduce the rhythms of the processes of thought, the internal monologue need not necessarily take the processes of thought as its exclusive subject. Indeed, by interpolating images and sounds into the external course of events and elements of external events into the images and sounds themselves, the internal monologue abolishes the distinction between subject and object and liberates content from form.¹⁴ Eisenstein clearly saw Joyce as a key influence on his work as a filmmaker and his writings on film are punctuated with references to Joyce. In his notes for his proposed film of Marx's *Capital*, he wrote that while the film would officially be

¹² See Eisenstein, 'Notes for a Film of Capital', Maciej Sliwowski, Leyda, and Annette Michelson, trans. *October*, 2 (Summer 1976), 21. James Goodwin, 'Eisenstein, Ecstasy, Joyce and Hebraism', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Spring 2000), 529-57. Maria DiBattista 'This is Not a Movie: *Ulysses* and Cinema' *Modernism / Modernity*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April 2006), 219-235.

¹³ Gösta Werner, 'James Joyce and Sergei Eisenstein', Erik Gunnemark trans., *James Joyce Quarterly* Vol. 23 No. 3 (Spring 1990), 491-507. See also Paul Tiessen, 'Eisenstein, Joyce, and the Gender Politics of English Literary Modernism', *Kinema* (Spring 1993) <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/tiess931.htm> [accessed June 2006].

¹⁴ Werner, 'James Joyce and Sergei Eisenstein', 494.

dedicated to the Second International, the formal side would be dedicated to Joyce.¹⁵ Eisenstein's thesis typified the openness to artistic experiment which was the hallmark of cultural life in the first decade of the Soviet state. This openness is also reflected in the largely positive initial responses to Joyce among Marxist critics. Following the failure of German revolution and the rise of Stalinism, this policy of artistic openness to innovation would shift dramatically in the 1930s.

According to Neil Cornwell, the first piece published on Joyce in Russia appears to have been by Yevgeniy Zamyatin in *Sovremennyy Zapad (The Contemporary West)* in 1923.¹⁶ Zamyatin is therefore credited with first initiating interest in Joyce among Russian modernist writers, an interest which developed over the next decade and which is evident, even if negatively, in the many attacks made on modernism and on Joyce in particular in the 1933-34 period. In his 1923 review, Zamyatin wrote of *Ulysses*:

The novel, having made a strong impression on the continent, provokes a rather cold attitude on the part of English critics. They consider it 'anti-European' for its extreme individualism, overstepping the mark into anarchism, for its complete denial of social morals. Something common in spirit with *The Brothers Karamazov* is noted. The idiosyncratic interweaving in the novel of the tragic and the comic principals is acknowledged to be a typical feature of 'the Irish mind'.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Eisenstein, 'Notes for a Film of *Capital*' Maciej Sliwowski, Leyda and Annette Michelson trans., *October* 2 (Summer 1976), 21.

¹⁶ Yevgeniy Zamyatin was one of the editors of *Sovremennyy Zapad (The Contemporary West)*, a Russian journal of literature science, art, reviews and translations. It was designed to offer Soviet readers a flavour of Western intellectual debate. Six issues were published between 1922 and 1924. The 'review' of *Ulysses* was published in Vol. 2 in 1923. As Neil Cornwell notes, it is not clear from the text whether Zamyatin had read *Ulysses*, or merely reviews of it. See Neil Cornwell 'Some Russian Attitudes to James Joyce' in *Irish Slavonic Studies*, 5 (1985), 57. Zamyatin may be referring to John Middleton Murray's 1922 review of *Ulysses* which attacked the novel as anti-European and morally corrupt. See John Middleton Murray, 'Ulysses', *Nation and Athanaeum*, No. 31, 22 April 1922, 124-25. Reprinted in Robert Deming, ed., *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, 2 Vols. (London: Routledge, 1970), 195-98. See also Joseph Brooker, *Joyce's Critics: Transitions in Reading and Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 33.

¹⁷ 'Zamyatin on *Ulysses*', translated by Neil Cornwell in *James Joyce Broadsheet*, 8 (June 1982), 4.

The first Russian translation of Joyce appeared in 1925 and consisted of some thirty odd pages of extracts of *Ulysses* (from episodes 1, 7, 12, 17 and 18), including a piece from 'Penelope'. In 1927 an incomplete edition of *Dubliners* (without 'The Sisters', 'Grace', 'An Encounter' and 'A Mother') was published. The first complete article on Joyce in Russian was written by a presumed Irishman, Eugene Fogarty (Yudzhin Fogerti), who argues that *Ulysses* is comprehensible, if not to the ordinary reader then at least to the 'ordinary Irishman with a Catholic upbringing'.¹⁸ Fogarty, who appears to have known Joyce, reports that Joyce hoped that the French translation of his work would allow his work to be more widely read in Russia. Fogarty's principal emphasis is on Joyce's qualities as a realist of both a photographic and a cinematic type, and he classifies him as a 'surprising phenomenon; an Irishman and yet one without the slightest interest in politics; an incomparable writer and a solitary figure'. However, Fogarty does conclude that 'as it seems to me, the spirit of Russian art is alien to him. He is too distant from the masses; like an ascetic of ancient times, he is not of this world; he is above the world'.¹⁹

The exiled Russian critic D.S. Mirsky (formerly Prince Mirsky) wrote an influential article in 1928, which was published in *Vyorsty* (*Versts*), a short-lived journal designed to bridge the gap between Soviet and émigré Russia.²⁰ Mirsky used the journal to introduce readers to the work of Western modernists such as Joyce and T.S. Eliot. In an article on Joyce, he heralded the publication of *Ulysses* as a sign of 'an exceptionally big new power in European literature' and declared Leopold Bloom to be 'the greatest

¹⁸ This article was translated 'from an English manuscript' by N. Vel'min and appears to have been written for a Soviet audience. The English language edition of *Dubliners / A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published by Moscow based Progress Publishers in 1982, contains a list of translations of Joyce's work into Russian. See pages 583-5.

¹⁹ Yudzhin Fogerti (Eugene Fogarty), cited in Cornwell, 'Some Russian Attitudes to James Joyce', 58 [Translation by Cornwell].

²⁰ A verst is a Russian measure of length.

artistic symbol of the average man in world literature'.²¹ He was particularly impressed by the Circe episode and declared 'the improbable scene in the brothel' to be 'the culminating point of the book'. This is an important article not least because the very accolades that Mirsky showers on Joyce, he subsequently uses as arguments against him in the 1930s. He concludes by declaring that his purpose is 'to direct the Russian reader to the fact that in Europe there is now a writer whose equal has not been known since perhaps the time of Shakespeare'.²²

Articles on Joyce continued to appear throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s in Marxist intellectual journals and newspapers, some negative but many positive. However, as Cornwell and others have noted, by 1933 there was a marked political shift in Marxist intellectual circles (both nationally in Russia and internationally) as the debate about the political character of modernism intensified. This shift has to be understood in the context of the political changes that were occurring in Russia after Stalin's consolidation of power. Joyce's work featured prominently in this new phase of the Russian debate on modernism. Several literary groupings, including the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), were disbanded and a new aesthetic policy of socialist realism was introduced under the aegis of the new Union of Soviet Writers. Modernism was attacked as a deviant literary tendency, although much remains unclear about the exact nature of the critical debate on modernism.²³

²¹ D.S. Mirsky, '*Ulysses*', cited in Cornwell, 'Some Russian Attitudes to James Joyce', 59 [Translation by Cornwell].

²² Cornwell, 'Some Russian Attitudes to James Joyce', 59.

²³ The level of critical debate remains unclear because, as Gleb Struve argues, the exact role of individuals and journals in these debates on Joyce and modernism have still to be determined and many of the articles are unavailable. Furthermore, the degree of orchestration present in publicity campaigns up to and including the first congress of the Union of Soviet Writers and the identity and precise motives of the campaigns are unclear. In addition to this, the pressure for conformity, especially at the height of the purges, and the strength of the opposition, cannot be underestimated. Therefore, it would seem that the

The Marxist critic Georg Lukács played a prominent role in two of the key Marxist journals of the period that featured work on Joyce, *Literaturnyy Kritik* (*The Literary Circle*) and *Internatsional'naya Literatura* (*International Literature*).²⁴ In his article 'Ideology of Modernism' (1957) Lukács outlined in detail his case against the stream of consciousness technique, or the '*monologue intérieur*', exemplified, in his opinion, by Joyce's work.²⁵ He argued that the realist novel, at its best, maintained a critical balance between the inner or private world of the individual consciousness and the public or outer social world. According to Lukács, the stream of consciousness technique shattered the equilibrium maintained between the public and private worlds in the classic realist novel and shifted the emphasis entirely towards the atomised inner consciousness:

I refer to the fact that with Joyce the stream-of-consciousness technique is no mere stylistic device, it is itself the formative principle governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of character. Technique here is something absolute; it is part and parcel of the aesthetic ambition informing *Ulysses* . . . It would be absurd, in view of Joyce's artistic ambitions and his manifest abilities, to qualify the exaggerated attention he gives to the detailed recording of sense data, and his comparative neglect of ideas and emotions, as artistic failure. All this was in conformity with Joyce's artistic intentions; and, by use of such techniques, he may be said to have achieved them satisfactorily. But between Joyce's intentions and those of Thomas Mann there is a total opposition. The perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory-data, their powerfully charged – but aimless and directionless –

articles should not be read purely at face value. See Gleb Struve, 'Socialist Realism versus James Joyce', *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin 1917-1953* (London: Routledge, 1972), 268.

²⁴ *The Literary Circle* was founded in 1933 and was dominated by critics that included George Lukács and Mikhail Lifshits. It was shut down for ideological reasons in 1940. *International Literature* was published from 1933 to 1943 in English, French, German and Russian. Lukács was also closely involved in this journal.

²⁵ Georg Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism', *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans., John Mander and Necke Mander (London: Merlin 1963), 17-46.

fields of force, give rise to an epic structure which is static, reflecting a belief in the basically static character of events.²⁶

This is why Lukács in 'Realism in the Balance' (1938) considered Joyce in the same context as the German Expressionists, with whom he would have been more familiar, when he condemned Joyce's modernism in his debate with Ernest Bloch in the 1930s.²⁷

In 1932 D.S. Mirsky returned to Moscow, joined the Bolshevik party and became a prominent voice in the Marxist debate on modernism. Mirsky's position on *Ulysses* at this time stood in stark contrast to the views which he had expressed in 1928. He now argued, perhaps anxious to prove his Marxist credentials, that even the highest achievements of Western formalistic writers must be shown to lead to 'irreparable blind alleys'. While Mirsky acknowledges that Russian critics frequently revealed a degree of ignorance by falsely equating Proust and Joyce, he asserts that this ignorance in itself displays a healthy vitality, because 'the proletarian reader building socialism here [Russia] or struggling for the socialist revolution in the West absolutely does not need Joyce and Proust.' Neither, he concludes, is it necessary for any socialist critic to study these authors, as 'neither Joyce nor Proust belongs to that bourgeois heritage which socialist culture may, having critically worked over, take on board'.²⁸ This view would soon become the standard (and later official) socialist attitude to modernism for the next two decades.

The supposed superiority of socialist realism, the only officially sanctioned aesthetic form in Russia, was reinforced at the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress in Moscow, where *Ulysses* was singled out for a scathing attack in a speech delivered by

²⁶ Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism', 18.

²⁷ See Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance' in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 28-59.

²⁸ Mirsky cited in Cornwell, 'Some Russian Attitudes to James Joyce', 59

Karl Radek.²⁹ He described socialist realism as ‘not only knowing reality as it is, but knowing whither it is moving’.³⁰ Radek effectively gave official recognition to Mirsky’s thesis when he argued that Joyce’s writing exemplified the tendency within bourgeois literature towards parasitism and decay. In a speech entitled ‘James Joyce or Socialist Realism?’, Radek argued that the basic tenet of Joyce’s writing is the ‘conviction that there is nothing big in life – no big events, no big people, no big ideas; and the writer can give a picture of life by just taking “any given hero on any given day,” and reproducing him with exactitude’. He famously concluded by declaring Joyce’s work to be ‘a heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope’.³¹

Despite the virulence of the speech, Radek’s knowledge of *Ulysses* or of Ireland seems very slight. Joyce is dismissed within ten paragraphs and there is little evidence that Radek had read *Ulysses*. He states that *Ulysses* was set in Ireland in 1916 and wonders why Joyce made no mention of the Easter Rising of that year. It is difficult to take Radek’s argument seriously, in particular when he argues that Joyce’s most serious error is his failure on a political level to carry antibourgeois sentiment over into explicit socialist commitment. This ‘failure’, he goes on to argue, must lead automatically to failure on the aesthetic levels also:

²⁹ Karl Radek (1885-1939) was a member of the Russian Social and Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) since its inception in 1898. He was active in Galicia, Russia, Poland and Germany, organising against the First World War. Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, he joined the Bolshevik Party until he was expelled in 1927 for his participation in the Left Opposition. He rejoined the party in 1930 but was expelled again in 1937. He was tried in the Second Moscow Trial and died in prison in 1939. His contemporary Victor Serge described him as ‘[a] sparkling writer... thin, rather small, nervous, full of anecdotes which often had a savage side to them ... just like an old-time pirate.’

³⁰ Radek, cited in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ‘Nietzsche’s Hidden Voice in Socialist Realism’ in *Cold Fusion: Aspects of German Cultural Presence in Russia* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 200.

³¹ Karl Radek, ‘Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art’ in Gorky, Radek, Bukharin, Zhdanov and others, *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), 82.

A capitalist magnate cannot be presented by the method which Joyce uses in attempting to present his vile hero, Bloom, not because his private life is less trivial than that of Bloom, but because he is an exponent of great worldwide contradictions, because, when he is battling with some rival trust or hatching plots against the Soviet Union, he must not be spied on in the brothel or the bedroom, but must be portrayed on the great arena of world affairs. Needless to say, trying to present a picture of revolution by the Joyce method would be like trying to catch a dreadnought with a shrimping net.³²

Radek's thesis was that modernist literature was incapable of articulating the contemporary moment: the death of capitalism and the emergence of a new social order, socialism. Unlike the great masterpieces of Western literature of the past, contemporary bourgeois literature has failed to create a literary form capable of articulating the modern moment. What exists instead is a cacophony of literary forms unable to offer any unified vision of the world.

Radek's assessment of Joyce, while both inaccurate and unjust, must be understood in the context of the debates of the period. His comments on Joyce are frequently quoted out of context, making his analysis a sort of minor classic in Joycean criticism, supposedly illustrative of the narrow-minded, short-sighted and dogmatic dismissal of Joyce's work by Marxist critics of the 1920s and 1930s. What is less frequently cited is how Radek went on to note that Joyce's focus on the minutiae of everyday life was simply a feature of naturalism, arguing that 'a heap of dung is in the same way a part of reality as the sun, a drop of dew in which the sun is reflected. A heap of dung can be a component of the great picture'.³³ Radek's critique of Joyce could more accurately be understood as his attempt to highlight the differences between modernism and naturalism. Excessive concern with language and technique, argues Radek, produces

³² Radek, 'Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art', 82-3.

³³ Radek, 'Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art', 83.

a text that turns in on itself and therefore away from reality and detracts from a writer's ability to conceive of society as a social totality, and the situation of this totality within the process of history.³⁴ Indeed, Radek's critique that Joyce's excessive concern with technique estranges his work from reality concurs, even if negatively, with the work of the New Critics in the 1950s. The New Critics elevated a concern with style and technique to the ultimate literary virtue as they argued that it helped to separate literature from social reality and therefore to situate literature firmly within its own 'intrinsic' realm. The essential difference between Radek and the New Critics was one of politics. For Radek, disengagement from history means that literature cannot contribute to the positive movement of revolutionary change that Radek, and many others within the left, believed to be underway in the 1930s. Radek made no attempt to provide a detailed reading of *Ulysses*; rather, he used Joyce and *Ulysses* to make a general point about culture.³⁵

Eisenstein defended *Ulysses* against Radek's condemnation with a passionate retort:

Radek's critique of Joyce was based essentially on one point. He said that we don't need things in such microscopic detail. We don't see that way, such phenomena don't exist. But that criticism is as if a person at some first-aid station saw an enlargement of something under the microscope on the wall said: 'Why is this necessary? After all, microbes aren't that big. After all, you don't see all that in real life.' Do you understand the mistake here? The thing

³⁴ Later in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958) Lukács argued that modernism is fundamentally naturalistic in its orientation and he identifies Joyce as a writer in which 'the essentially naturalistic character of modernism comes to the fore' (52). Though Lukács's assessment of Joyce is less strident than that of Radek's, there is an essential political-philosophical concurrence in their approaches.

³⁵ Joseph Brooker has noted the irony of the fact that conservative European critics often dismissed Joyce as a 'Bolshevik' because of his assaults on European civilisation. See, for example, John Middleton Murray's 1922 review '*Ulysses*' and S.P.B. Mais, 'An Irish Revel: And Some Flappers', *Daily Express*, 25 March 1922, in Deming, *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, 195-98, 191.

is that you have to study those charts in order to be able to know those invisible bacteria, those invisible elements, in order to possess them.

Interestingly, while Marxist critics were leaping to persecute him, Joyce said quietly to his friend Eugene Jolas, 'I don't know why they attack me. Nobody in any of my books is worth more than a thousand pounds.'³⁶ Joyce's former association with Ezra Pound, whose addled Fascist pronouncements during the Second World War he did not live to hear, can hardly have enhanced Joyce's standing on the left. Generally the Cold War period was not a propitious time in the West for advancing Marxist positions, let alone a Marxist critique of a writer who had been abandoned by the left.

The influence of social realism set the tone for most Marxist literary criticism up until the 1960s. Following the early rejection of Joyce by Marxist critics such as Radek and Lukács, political readings of Joyce tended to be non-Marxist in nature, although as we have also seen Joyce was never so thoroughly rejected on the left as critics on the right have claimed. Nevertheless rejections of Joyce by critics such as Radek and Lukács provided support for Western formalist critics who sought to divorce Joyce's work from politics. Indeed, Joycean critics sometimes still continue to feel the need to defend Joyce against Marxist critiques of his work, as when Denis Donoghue, in an essay published in 1992, strangely sets out to defend Joyce against Fredric Jameson's 'full-scale attack' on *Ulysses*, even though Jameson repeatedly expressed great admiration for the novel and its positive political potential.³⁷

³⁶ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 5. Dominic Maganiello has pointed out that the young Joyce was quite interested in socialist politics. Commenting on Joyce's allusion to the Irish Socialist Party in 'A Painful Case' in *Dubliners*, Maganiello suggests that this was Connolly's Irish Socialist and Republican Party (ISR). He also points out that Stanislaus remembered that his brother 'had frequented meetings of socialist groups in back rooms'. See Dominic Maganiello, *Joyce's Politics* (London: Routledge, 1980), 126-128.

³⁷ Denis Donoghue, 'Is there a case against *Ulysses*?' *Joyce in Context* edited by Vincent J. Cheng and Timothy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 19-39.

In the 1930s a number of key independent Marxist intellectuals, in particular those associated with the Frankfurt School, began to consider questions of consciousness and culture as vital but neglected components of a dialectical conception of history and society as a means of understanding the lack of resistance within modern capitalism.³⁸ This would become a major influence on what would later come to be described as Western Marxism, an intellectual position that was at odds with both Social Democratic and Communist orthodoxy. It was this body of writing, little known in the English-speaking world until 1955 or 1960, which would come to dominate Marxist theory and influence a whole new generation of Marxist critics. It would also transform the Marxist reception of modernism, bringing about a situation in which Marxism would by the late twentieth century almost uncritically embrace modernism as a great revolutionary assault on capitalism and, as such, essentially as kindred in spirit to Marxism itself.

5.3 Samuel Beckett and Marxism

The work of Samuel Beckett has long prompted a profound sense of unease among Marxist literary critics, even among those sympathetic to his work. Beckett is commonly charged with a fatalistic acceptance of nihilism, despair and pessimism, and his work is seen to represent the antithesis of any progressive political engagement. Lukács accused him of portraying 'the utmost pathological human degradation'.³⁹ Even Bertolt Brecht, who was much more sympathetic to modernism than Lukács was, and who defended

³⁸ See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley / London; University of California Press, 1982). For example, Georg Lukács's work examined the 'reified' mental structures of a commodity society, Antonio Gramsci drew attention to the 'cultural hegemony' of the Western bourgeoisie, and the Frankfurt School utilised theories of psychoanalysis.

³⁹ Lukács, *Healthy Art or Sick*, cited in Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ronald Taylor trans. (London: Verso, 1980), 156.

German Expressionism against charges of 'decadence' by Lukács, despised Beckett's artistic vision and at the time of his death, in 1956, intended writing a critique of *Waiting for Godot*.⁴⁰ The Irish socialist writer, Sean O'Casey, wrote of Beckett, that 'there is no hazard of hope; no desire for it; nothing in it but a lust for despair' and declared that he would 'have nothing to do with him'.⁴¹ In a strident critique, the left-wing dramatist Dennis Potter identified the instincts in Beckett's work with the moral deformities that created the concentration camps and gulags:

Would Solzhenitsyn have understood? Would the Jews on the way to the gas chamber? Question: Is this the art which is the response to the despair and pity of our age, or is it made of the kind of futility which helped such desecrations of the spirit, such filth of ideologies come into being?⁴²

Like these literary commentators, many Marxist critics have continued to be hostile to the form and content of Beckett's theatre and to its resistance, indeed hostility, to any form of literalism, including political, and above all to its opposition to any crude demand for optimism. His writing resists and frustrates all attempts to decipher its symbols or to provide a coherent, unified interpretation. In a letter to director Alan Schneider in 1957, Beckett wrote:

My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together stated *nec tecum nec sine te*

⁴⁰ See Lawrence Graver, *Waiting For Godot: A Reader's Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161.

⁴¹ O'Casey cited in Christopher Murray, *Sean O'Casey: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 370. Beckett, on the other hand, seems to have admired O'Casey: see Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett* (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave, 2004).

⁴² Denis Potter's Review of the 1977 BBC production of *Not I* cited in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 636. As Knowlson comments, Beckett would have read this 'as someone who had joined the battle against Fascism as a Resistance agent precisely because of what the Nazis were doing to the Jews'.

[neither with you nor without you], in such a place, and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could.⁴³

Here Beckett appears to be arguing that he does not intend to signify or symbolise anything beyond what is stated, just as in his novel *Watt* he writes 'no symbols where none is intended'.⁴⁴ Yet, it is difficult to take Beckett at his word here as his work is full of symbols and signifiers that appear to be structured in such a way that they refer, in a cryptic manner, to certain philosophical texts, historical events, or to other literary works. His statement also suggests that as a writer Beckett is more concerned with form than content, with the sound and the rhythm of the words, rather than with communicating ideas or advancing a particular meaning. He writes:

I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine: 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.⁴⁵

However, even if Beckett's work only gives us 'fundamental sounds' which 'take no sides' that does not exclude the possibility that he and his work were still shaped by the political realities of their time. For example, when asked during the Spanish Civil War to contribute to a set of statements on the conflict by writers, his reply was typically laconic. Beckett's answer came on a card on which was simply printed 'UPTHEREPUBLIC'. As Irish theatre critic Fintan O'Toole suggests, 'for one of the great Irishmen of the twentieth century, it was easier to declare support for a Spanish Republic than for an Irish Republic. By taking possession of an Irish slogan that had

⁴³ Alan Schneider cited in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 39.

⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Grove Press 1976), 255.

⁴⁵ Alan Schneider, 'Working with Beckett' in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (eds) *Samuel Beckett: the Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge, 1979), 173.

been used by both Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil, and that had little appeal for him, Beckett was making a joke on both himself and Ireland.⁴⁶ While Beckett's reply, in the form of a traditional Irish Republican slogan, poked fun at himself as an Irish Protestant, it can also be seen as a declaration of support for those struggling against fascism in Spain. Beckett, was certainly not alone in his declaration of support for those fighting against fascism in Spain, many writers, artists and intellectuals in the 1930s made far less ambiguous statements of support. What it does show is that Beckett was not simply indifferent to politics and political action as he has sometimes been accused of being. Indeed, Beckett told his biographer James Knowlson how he regretted that the aesthetic forms he worked in did not allow him to respond more directly to politics.⁴⁷

While Beckett's political sympathies appear to have been with the left and/or liberal, he consistently denied that his works had any social or political significance. Beckett would have thought the popular 1930 Marxist perspective that 'all writing is political' nonsensical, not because he believed that literary art was intensely subjective or aesthetically 'autonomous' but because he came of age as a writer at a time when every writer was under pressure to declare explicitly a political stand, a 'tendency', a commitment or engagement. For Beckett's generation, writing was political because the times pressured writers to be so. Beckett chose quite consciously against being a 'committed' writer. While many writers of the 1930's and 1940's accepted that art must either be autonomous or committed, Beckett did not, and his rejection of politicised art had an enormous and complex impact on the development of his career. As David Weisberg argues, 'What ultimately structures the innovative features of Beckett's best

⁴⁶ Fintan O'Toole, 'The Unreal Republic', *The Thomas Davis Lecture Series 2005: The Republic*, Mary Jones ed. (Dublin: Mercier Press/RTE, 2005), 88.

⁴⁷ See Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 637-643.

fiction is a struggle to re-imagine a communicative literature beyond the choices of autonomy or commitment'. He concludes that 'if Beckett's writing is 'apolitical it is because in the terms he was given, he really had no other choice'.⁴⁸

If much of the literary politics of the 1930s and 1940s compelled a writer to choose within a very limited range of options, then the 1960s and 1970s saw a shift towards creating a literary politics that was based on a system of textual effects. A writer's politics was no longer connected to specific social or political groupings; rather, the political implications of a work were located in the extent to which that work resisted or reinforced 'bourgeois norms of understanding and narrative authority'. Weisberg makes the point that this meant that 'the progressive writer's goal (if such a phrase makes sense in this context) was to disappear into the discourse and allow the signifier free play'.⁴⁹ The theoretical reference for this shift is Michel Foucault's seminal essay 'What is an Author?' (1979), which opens with a quotation from Beckett's 'Texts for Nothing': 'what does it matter who is speaking'.⁵⁰ Foucault inverts Beckett's denial of socially relevant meaning. What 1930s Marxist critics had condemned modernism for – namely its ideological retreat from social reality and the political world into form – was now reconstituted as a political strength. Weisberg, however, suggests that a more credible account of Beckett's place in the cultural politics of the twentieth century lies somewhere between the harsh divisions of the 1930s, which he rejected, and their inversion in the vision of a writing free from the constraints of convention and representation. He goes on to argue that Beckett's work after the Second World War and

⁴⁸ David Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (New York: State University of New York, 2000), 1-2.

⁴⁹ Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder*, 2.

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in David Lodge ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London & New York: Longman, 1988), 197-211.

its refusal to engage with the political realities of the period can be seen to challenge, compulsively, the assumptions and values of modernism, cultural vanguardism and social commitment 'in relation to one other'. Weisberg concludes that if, as the textual critics argue, the defining feature of Beckett's writing is its indeterminacy, 'it is an indeterminacy specific to a mid-century, post-World War II instability in conceptualizing the writer's social function'. Therefore he concludes, 'what may after all, constitute Beckett's importance for twentieth-century literary history is just how emphatically his work begs for an alternate way of configuring an aesthetics/ political nexus'.⁵¹

Beckett's work should be of interest to Marxist critics because he deliberately flouts or denies the consolations offered by classical forms of tragedy. The structure of his drama resolutely refuses the closure, resolution or catharsis offered by classical tragedy. In Beckett, heroism is constantly spurned and pretensions to grandeur are remorselessly mocked. Yet the absence of the much-yearned-for resolution, the failure of characters to achieve recognition, the fumbling aphasia and evasion with which they confront their mystifying condition, are themselves tokens of tragic loss – the loss of the conventional tragic consolation. Therefore, if Beckett is writing tragedy, it is of a new sort, eager to embody the speechlessness and inarticulacy of the modern human condition in a post-holocaust world. But modern critical theory has often, like Marxism, had difficulty with the concept of tragedy. If traditional accounts of tragedy have an investment in definitions of 'what it is to be a human being', then, unsurprisingly, movements such as feminism and post-colonialism are likely to experience discomfort with the term, perceiving in the normative notion of the 'human' a category the excludes

⁵¹ Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder*, 3

the marginal or non-male elements. There is a particularly long-standing hostility to tragedy within Marxist theory, which perceives a fatalism and political inertia at the heart of tragic discourse that is seen as hostile to political radicalism. As Ronan McDonald's writes, paraphrasing a common leftist view, 'if tragedy is anti-revolutionary, then revolution is anti-tragic.'⁵² There has been some attempt by Marxist theorists to construct a materialist approach to tragedy, which is worth considering briefly in relation to Beckett. Raymond Williams queries the Marxist notion that tragedy leaves no room for meliorism (and meliorism no room for tragedy) and argues that Marxism's anti-tragic bias diminishes the revolutionary spirit.⁵³ Williams's attempt to construct a historical materialist approach to tragedy was heavily influenced by Brecht's work on the subject.⁵⁴ Brecht abandons the traditional approach to tragedy that locates suffering within the idea of flawed human nature. Instead, he explores the contradictions and tensions that constitute human relationships and which are as much socially mediated as metaphysically inaugurated. The difficulty that Marxist critics have with tragedy is that even if it espouses a universal 'moral order' or cosmic truth, the examination of that moment when social stability is ruptured and social norms are transgressed, is fleeting. McDonald's thesis offers Marxist critics a way around this difficulty, arguing that if universal ideas of order were replaced with communal social or societal norms and values, and the 'flaws' of character (in terms of the inner psychic life of the hero) were repositioned 'as disruptive eddies in the larger social formation' then

⁵² McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature*, 8.

⁵³ See Raymond Williams 'Tragedy and Revolution' in *Modern Tragedy* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 93-136.

⁵⁴ Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willet trans., ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 181f.

these ‘ruptures seem less innately perverse’.⁵⁵

Beckett’s drama was of central importance to one of the twentieth century’s most important Marxist theoreticians, T. W. Adorno. Adorno published ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’ in 1961, an essay regarded by many to be the most important piece of criticism on a single work by Beckett.⁵⁶ Comments about Beckett appear throughout Adorno’s writing on culture and aesthetics and the Irish playwright is central to Adorno’s understanding of aesthetics and he had planned to dedicate his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) to Beckett.⁵⁷ *Endgame* is a particularly difficult text. Even Beckett described the play as ‘rather difficult, elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than *Godot*’.⁵⁸ In ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, Adorno argues that ‘[u]nderstanding it [*Endgame*] can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility, or concretely reconstructing its meaning structure – that it has none ...[n]ot meaning anything becomes the only meaning.’⁵⁹ Disputing to those who argue that *Endgame* is simply meaningless, Adorno reads the play as a text that debates meaning, that addresses and reconstructs the historical negation of meaning. For Adorno there is a connection between the difficulty of understanding the contemporary world and the challenge of understanding Beckett. He argues that Beckett’s drama represents the most acceptable response to the dilemmas of cultural production raised by the Holocaust. In other words, Beckett’s preoccupation with physical suffering is a response to the particular ethical imperative bequeathed by ‘Auschwitz’, an imperative Adorno

⁵⁵ McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature*, 8.

⁵⁶ T. W. Adorno, ‘Versuch, das *Endspiel* zu verstehen’ was first published in *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt am Main, 1961). It was translated into English by Michael T. Jones and published as ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, *New German Critique*, No. 26 (Spring–Summer 1982), 119-50.

⁵⁷ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Rober Hullot-Kentor trans. (London & New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁵⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Village Voice* (March 19, 1958), 8-15.

⁵⁹ Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, 137, 120.

defines in the following manner: 'thou shall not inflict pain . . . this injunction can find its justification only in the recourse to material reality, to corporeal, physical reality'.⁶⁰

Adorno's cultural politics, his preference for Beckett over Brecht, cannot be disconnected from his defense of modern art against critics like Lukács. For Adorno, art's political relevance cannot be disconnected from its historical meaning. Lambert Zuidervaart argues in his study of Adorno's aesthetics that the latter's defense of modern art is part of a paradoxical attempt to retain an historical telos without making inflated claims about what human beings have achieved.⁶¹ For Adorno, contemporary reflections on historical meaning must recognise that they occur after Auschwitz:

A child fond of an innkeeper named Adam, watched him club to death the rats pouring out of holes in the courtyard; it was in his image that the child pictured the first human being. That this has been forgotten . . . is both the triumph of culture and its failure. Culture cannot tolerate the memory of that zone, because culture keeps imitating the old Adam . . . It abhors the stench because culture stinks; because, as Brecht's magnificent line has it, the palace of culture is built out of dogshit. Years after that line was written, Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably the failure of culture . . . All culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage . . . Anyone who enters a plea for maintaining this radically guilty and shabby culture becomes an accomplice, while anyone who rejects culture is directly furthering the barbarism that culture showed itself to be.⁶²

Here, Adorno questions the claim that autonomous art and philosophy can give meaning to life, since the separation of manual and intellectual labour is what produced the current cultural impoverishment. It is not a separation that can be intellectually overcome since we cannot avoid contributing to the culture we criticise. Therefore, to

⁶⁰ T. W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Rolf Tiedemann ed., Edmund Jephcott trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 117.

⁶¹ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of the Illusion* (Cambridge Mass.; MIT Press, 1997), 152.

⁶² T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 359-60, 366-67.

critically engage with the world, we must become self-critical. Adorno's thesis in *Negative Dialectics* gives voice to the ambiguity that arises when art and philosophy recognise their own impotence and complicity, but continue to aspire to create a more humane existence.⁶³ The crisis of subjectivity was not something art could avoid; rather, it was something it had to endure and it would be judged on its ability to do so.

In Beckettian terms, the task was 'to find a form that accommodates the mess'.⁶⁴ The mess, however, encompassed art as well as ordinary life, and thus recoiled on the very forms that sought to present it. In paradoxical terms that Adorno would have applauded, Beckett understood the artist's implication in this task when he has 'B' in 'Three Dialogues' observe that the contemporary artist is doomed to 'the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'.⁶⁵ The goal of Beckett's art implied immersion in the material, for only here could the expression of the subject deprived of expression occur.⁶⁶ Adorno and Beckett reinstate the question of commitment at the level of the immanent dialectic of form.

For Adorno, art, along with philosophy, were the only theatres of resistance to 'the administrated universe' of the twentieth century. He criticised Lukács's view of realism, arguing that literature does not have to engage directly with reality in order to succeed aesthetically and politically. In Adorno's view, art is set apart from reality, its detachment is what gives it its special significance and power. Modernist writings are particularly distanced from the reality to which they allude, and this distance gives their

⁶³ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 151.

⁶⁴ Anthony Uhlmann, Sjef Houppermans and Bruno Clément, eds., *After Beckett: D'après Beckett* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), 283.

⁶⁵ Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1976), 17

⁶⁶ Uhlmann et al., *After Beckett*, 283.

work the power to critique reality. While popular art forms are forced to collude with the economic system that shapes them, 'autonomous' works have the power to 'negate' the reality to which they relate. Because modernist texts reflect the alienated inner lives of individuals, Lukács attacked them as 'decadent' embodiments of late capitalist society and as evidence of the writers' inability to transcend the atomistic and fragmented worlds in which they were compelled to live. Adorno argues that art cannot simply reflect the social system, but acts within that reality as an irritant which produces an indirect sort of knowledge: 'Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world.'⁶⁷ This can be achieved, he believed, by writing 'difficult' experimental texts and not directly polemical or critical works. Traditional descriptive narrative, in the sense of nineteenth-century realism, was no longer historically appropriate. Only such fragmentation of personality and authorial standpoint as occurs in the novels of Proust, Joyce, or Musil, for example, will adequately express the extent of our contemporary individual self-estrangement and suffering. Adorno discovered in Beckett's work the ultimate expression of the contemporary alienated individual.

Adorno reads *Endgame* as a 'history of the subject's end'.⁶⁸ He cautions that Beckett's plays and novels are not to be understood as ahistorically existential, rather they are powerful suggestions of the 'afterdeath' of the historically definable category of individuality:

Instead of excluding the temporal from existence . . . he subtracts that which time – the historical trend – is in reality preparing to annul. He extends the trajectory of the subject's liquidation to the point where it shrinks to the here-and-now . . . History is excluded, because it itself has dehydrated the power of consciousness to conceive history: the power of memory . . . All that appears

⁶⁷ Adorno, 'Reconciliation Under Duress' in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), 160.

⁶⁸ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 260.

of history is its result, its decline.⁶⁹

Endgame, for Adorno, articulates the epilogue of subjectivity in that all that remains of freedom is the 'impotent and ridiculous' reaction of 'empty decisions'.

Endgame interweaves Adorno's two central concerns: the social and political destruction of the autonomous individual, the ideology of which had sustained European culture since the Enlightenment, and the social function of modern art, which in its 'apolitical hypostatization of subjective freedom had contributed, knowingly or not, to the conditions leading up to the historical tragedies of the twentieth century'.⁷⁰

Endgame transformed the heroic individual of classical literature into a mocking, frightening semblance of individualism, challenging the norms of classical and modern drama. The play's abstract and menacing backdrop of total catastrophe evoked for its Cold War audience the irrational violence of the world around them, although Hamm's and Clov's fear 'that they might mean something' evoked Beckett's own anxiety that his play would be taken as a commentary on something essentially unrepresentable. As Adorno argues, the play represented perfectly the post-Holocaust 'antinomy of contemporary art' because while it protested against 'the regression' of European humanism it refused to put this protest into terms that could be easily assimilated:

Playing with elements of reality without any mirroring, taking no stand and finding pleasure in this freedom from prescribed activity, exposes more than would taking a stand with intent to expose. The name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence. The catastrophe that has befallen the whole is illuminated in the horrors of the last catastrophe, but only in those horrors, not when one looks at its origins. For Beckett, the human being . . . is only what he becomes . . . mourning itself is no longer possible. No weeping melts the armor; the only face left is the one whose tears have dried up. This lies at the

⁶⁹ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 125.

⁷⁰ Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder*, 6.

basis of an artistic method that is denounced as inhuman by those whose humanness has already become an advertisement for the inhuman, even if they are not aware of it.⁷¹

While Adorno established that *Endgame* did indeed have a cultural and social context, he recognised that Beckett's conception of society was something that was restrictively encoded within an aesthetic rationality.⁷² *Endgame* is, for Adorno, the exemplary post-Holocaust text because it 'yields both to the impossibility of dealing with materials and of representation according to nineteenth-century practice'. It also reveals the 'subjective modes of reaction' which, rather than simply reflecting reality, mediate the laws of form.⁷³

Art generates a knowledge of historical processes, but in order for this knowledge to be acquired modern art must express the essence of the modern capitalist society. Zuidervaart argues this is the premise that is omitted from the *Endgame* essay: 'Whereas philosophy can no longer confidently criticize academic disciplines such as economics and sociology when trying to understand its own time, authentic artworks such as *Endgame* contain a penetrating apprehension of contemporary society'.⁷⁴ *Endgame* exposes the irrationality of contemporary society while resisting rational exposition but, according to Adorno at least, the play does not simply represent an abstract idea of

⁷¹ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 126.

⁷² It is unclear whether or not Beckett would have endorsed Adorno's reading of *Endgame*. It is interesting to note Beckett's reaction, as described in Knowlson's biography, to Adorno's analysis of his work when they meet in Frankfurt in 1961. During lunch, 'Adorno immediately developed his idea about the etymology and the philosophy and the meaning of the names in Beckett. And Adorno insisted that "Hamm" derives from "Hamlet". He had a whole theory based on this. Beckett said "Sorry, professor, but I never thought of Hamlet when I invented the name". But Adorno insisted. And Beckett became a little angry . . . In the evening Adorno started his speech and, of course, pointed out the derivation of "Hamm" from Hamlet [adding that "Clov" was a crippled 'clown']. Beckett listened very patiently. But then he whispered into my [Dr. Siegfried Unseld] ear . . . "This is the progress of science that professors can proceed with their errors".' See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, 478-79.

⁷³ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 127.

⁷⁴ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 155.

absurdity. For him, it exposes instead the real absurdity of all culture, including existential philosophy, in the aftermath of the Second World War. By locating historical experience within the particulars of dramatic form, Beckett raises social critique to the level of aesthetic form.⁷⁵ The more difficult it is to find meaning in reality, the more illusory the concept of an aesthetic configuration that connects the artist's meaning with the work of art becomes. Beckett engages with the illusion directly and in *Endgame* creates a work that self-consciously parodies itself, and establishes, at one and the same time, the play's meaning and absence of meaning. As Zuidervaart concludes, '*Endgame* faces up to the historical absence of a metaphysical meaning sufficient to support overarching forms of dramatic unity', because if the play's dramatic structure and language remained meaningful in a traditional way, the play would be unable to express the absence of meaning.⁷⁶ Therefore, metaphysical meaninglessness becomes the meaning of *Endgame* because its 'aesthetic meaninglessness' obtains meaning 'as a determinate negation of the dramatic forms that used to affirm metaphysical meaning'.⁷⁷

For Zuidervaart, Beckett's *Endgame* becomes central to Adorno's aesthetic project because Adorno sees in Beckett the retrospective vision of the catastrophe of history that Walter Benjamin saw in Klee's *Angelus Novus*.⁷⁸ He argues that Beckett's drama produces for Adorno the most pertinent sense of the ethical obligations imposed on culture in the twentieth century. When Adorno argued that philosophy lives on because the moment to realise it was missed, he could also have been speaking about art. This belated existence of philosophy can no longer consign the truth of art to history (as

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 354.

⁷⁶ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 155.

⁷⁷ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 120.

⁷⁸ Uhlmann et al. *After Beckett*, 284.

Hegel does) and art becomes essential in the wake of the collapse of metaphysical meaning. In Adorno's reading of Beckett, art plays an important role in making 'the collapse of metaphysical meaning mean not just nothing'.⁷⁹ *Endgame* is not just expressing some abstract idea of absurdity, it is expressing the absurdity of all culture, including existential philosophy after the Second World War:

In the play, the substance of life, a life that is death, is the excretions. But the imageless image of death is one of indifference. In it, the distinctions disappears: the distinction between absolute domination, the hell in which time is banished into space, in which nothing will change anymore – and the messianic condition, where everything would be in its proper place.⁸⁰

Therein, for Adorno, lies the ultimate absurdity of the modern human condition; the 'response of nothingness' and 'the response of reconciliation' cannot be differentiated from one another.

Adorno's vision of Beckett's aesthetic negativity is centrally invested in a conception of aesthetic semblance as a refuge for the possibility of a different regime of embodiment – what Adorno characterises in terms of a 'transfigured body'.⁸¹ If redemption is thus linked to a transformed relationship to the material, in Beckett's Manichean vision 'deliverance' is identified with the separation of oppositions (light and darkness, spirit and matter), and literary textuality is situated at antipodes to this deliverance as separation. At issue here is a realist principle of evil; sin, guilt, or evil are located with embodiment and materiality, and this approach contrasts with the equation, developed by Adorno and Benjamin, between evil and subjectivism. One central implication of this distinction is that Beckett conceives of evil in substantive terms,

⁷⁹ Smir Gandesha, 'Leaving Home: On Adorno and Heidegger' in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Tom Huhn ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 114.

⁸⁰ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 150.

⁸¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 400.

rather than in the privative terms developed by Adorno (and Benjamin). That is, for Beckett, evil is coterminous with presence, embodiment, life. Thus, for example, he conceives of the ‘corruption’ of Joyce’s textuality as a series of ‘endless substantial variations’, or as an ‘endless verbal germination’.⁸² By contrast, for Adorno, evil is linked to various forms of privation – that is, to a negation of life, of sensuous particularity, or of a proper meaning denied to allegorical contemplation.⁸³ In *Endgame* the dialectic of master and slave converges with the immobilisation of the dialectic of the enlightenment: *Endgame* ends not with a final exit but with Clov standing motionless at the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm. The ending is identical to the beginning of the play. ‘No spectator, and no philosopher, would be capable of saying for sure whether or not the play is starting all over again. The pendulum of the dialectic has come to a standstill’.⁸⁴ The dialectic has come to a standstill and the master-slave dialectic is unavailable as an interpretative scheme to philosophers. Foremost among those ‘philosophers’ is Marx.⁸⁵

Adorno’s reading of Beckett is not without its difficulties. The main problem with his reading of *Endgame* is that while he recognises the difficulty of interpreting *Endgame*, in the end he seems to provide a determinate, unifying interpretation. Adorno himself seems to have no difficulty in uncovering ‘the’ meaning of *Endgame* as he reads the play into his own account of contemporary society. While possible interpretations are limited by the conditions of the play’s production onstage, and by Beckett’s larger

⁸² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 33-34.

⁸³ See Karin Bauer, *Adorno’s Nietzschean Narrative: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 168f and Christoph Menke, ‘Genealogy and Critique: Two Forms of Ethical Questioning of Morality’, in Tom Huhn ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 302–27, especially, 311ff.

⁸⁴ Adorno, ‘Trying to understand *Endgame*’, 256.

⁸⁵ J.M. Bernstein, ‘Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 31.

body of writing, *Endgame* resists being encapsulated by a definitive, unifying interpretation, something Adorno's essay implicitly rejects.

Nevertheless, Adorno's work on Beckett was an important shift in Marxist criticism with regard to modernism. The Soviet critics had denounced modernism in broad terms as formalist, and even degenerate, but by this time the socialism of the Soviet Union, with the rise of Stalin, had itself become corrupted and degenerated. In this context the emergence of the Frankfurt School was an important turning point in the intellectual history of Marxism. Influenced especially by the failure of working-class revolutions in Western Europe after First World War and by the rise of Nazism in an economically, technologically advanced nation like Germany, the Frankfurt School gathered together dissident Marxists who believed that Marxist theory had become corrupted into a defence of orthodox Communist or Social-Democratic parties. Unlike almost all other traditions of Marxist aesthetics they refused to move quickly away from the small details of the literary text to a sweeping subordination of the particular to the general social analysis and in so doing had a profound impact on the sociological, political and cultural thought of the twentieth century. Adorno's reading of *Endgame* lead the way for a very different type of political aesthetics and as such has been highly influential within left-wing aesthetic theory.⁸⁶

It would be easy to conclude that what we have in Adorno's essay is both a defeated Marxism and a defeated modernism. But Adorno's post-revolutionary Marxism

⁸⁶ Adorno's essay on Beckett has itself been the subject of some significant Marxist commentary. Some examples include Jay Bernstein, 'Philosophy's Refuge: Adorno in Beckett' in David Wood, ed., *Philosopher's Poets* (London: Routledge, 1990), 183-85 and Jameson's *Late Marxism: Adorno: Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990). *Endgame* has also received commentaries by J. M. Coetzee, Stanley Cavell and others. See J. M. Coetzee, 'Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style', in Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43-9 and Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 134-37.

is never quite reconciled to defeat and Adorno sees in Beckett a modernism in distress but not ready to admit defeat either. In many ways, then, Adorno's reception of Beckett anticipates late twentieth century Anglophone Marxist receptions of modernism more generally. Adorno understood, as Jameson has argued, that form is 'the final articulation of the deeper logic of the content itself'.⁸⁷ It was this understanding which enabled Adorno and the Frankfurt School to transcend the empty debate between formalism and sociological theories of art and, in the process, to reorientate the entire tradition of Marxist critical theory.

Adorno shows little interest in Beckett as an Irish writer and makes no attempt to situate Beckett in the Irish literary tradition of modernist theatre, or to connect his work with Irish dramatists such as Yeats, O'Casey or Synge. Indeed, Beckett himself had a difficult and complex relationship with his country of birth and Adorno was not alone among critics who were prepared to ignore Beckett's Irish heritage and understand him, instead, as a European writer.⁸⁸ While Joyce is seen as an Irish writer because his subject matter was Irish, Beckett is primarily interpreted as a French writer. Irish critics who have sought to locate Beckett's work in an Irish context have done so in vague and ambiguous ways. For example, W. J. McCormack argues that the dislocations and instabilities of the political situation in Ireland during Beckett's formative years are discernible in the shape and texture of his later work:

The altering relations between territory and power, between division and

⁸⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 403.

⁸⁸ See for example Seamus Deane, 'Joyce and Beckett' in Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), 123-134, Declan Kiberd, 'Beckett's Texts of Laughter and Forgetting' in Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1995), 530-50, Eoin O'Brien, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1986), John P. Harrington, *The Irish Beckett* (Syracuse University Press, 1991) and Mary Junker, *Samuel Beckett, The Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996).

authority, the violent ambiguity of Black-and-Tan terrorism, the emergence of a uniformed southern army where previously had been an unknown number of 'multi' volunteers, border warfare and fratricidal civil conflict – these tangible features of Beckett's late childhood and adolescence are not wholly remote from the intimate dislocations of his writing.⁸⁹

The term 'not wholly remote' is so vague as to be meaningless here and fails to make any substantive connection between Beckettian text and putative context. On the other hand, critics like Anthony Roche have struggled to situate Beckett's theatre within an Irish tradition. Roche constructs a line from Synge and O'Casey, but also W. B. Yeats (the theatre of failure), and asserts Beckett's importance as the 'presiding genius of contemporary Irish drama, the ghostly founding father'.⁹⁰ Fintan O'Toole sees continuities between austere forms of Irish naturalism and Beckett's minimalism. He argues that *Waiting for Godot* 'bears an uncanny relationship to the kind of jokes that people in Ireland were making about the rather bleak nature of the place in the 1950s, when isolation and emptiness had a literal resonance in the depopulation of the countryside.' He adds: 'before Samuel Beckett shocked European culture with theatrical images of things that were not happening, there were people in Ireland who had images in their heads of a theatre like this, not as an exercise in the avant-garde, but as a description of reality, Irish reality itself had a surreal quality'.⁹¹ Although Roche seems intent on imagining Beckett as the 'presiding genius of Irish drama' his deeper significance for Irish writers may be as an exemplary figure who raises such issues as translation, exile, estrangement and dispossession, themes at the heart of plays that

⁸⁹ W. J. McCormack, *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994), 380.

⁹⁰ Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 5.

⁹¹ Fintan O'Toole cited in C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, 'Ireland' in *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life and Thought*, (London: Faber, 2006), 277-78.

occupy a recognisably Irish setting in a way Beckett's own drama did not. More recently, Terry Eagleton, in an article published in *New Left Review* to mark the centenary of Beckett's birth, argues that Beckett's 'black humour and satirical wit' were 'cultural as well as personal traits'.⁹² Eagleton detects in Beckett's writing not just the starved and stagnant landscape of a post-Auschwitz Europe, highlighted by Adorno, but also traces of 'a subliminal memory of famished Ireland'. He argues that Beckett, as a southern Irish Protestant, 'belonged to a besieged minority of cultural aliens' who found themselves 'trapped within the Catholic parochialism of the Free State' after 1922. Hence, for Eagleton, Beckett was an 'internal émigré' long before he left Ireland:

As with any internal émigré, it seemed as logical to be homeless abroad as at home. The traditional alienation of the Irish artist could be translated into the more glamorous *Angst* of the European avant-garde. Art or language might prove substitutes for national identity, a phenomenon which could be derided as *passé* in polyglot bohemian cafes at the very moment when the most noxious nationalism of the modern epoch was looming over the horizon.⁹³

For Eagleton, Beckett is part of a long tradition of Irish Protestant writers who translated their internal displacement 'into a deeper kind of fidelity to dispossession'. Secondly, Eagleton detects in Beckett, as he does in Yeats, echoes of a Protestant rationalism. However, in Beckett, this rationalism is pressed to its limits, so much so that it 'capsizes into its opposite'. It is, Eagleton concludes, 'as though the whole formal apparatus of truth, reason and logic remains intact, even though its contents have long since leaked away', producing a kind of 'antidote to Gaelic extravagance'.⁹⁴

⁹² Terry Eagleton, 'Political Beckett?' *New Left Review* 2.40 (July-August 2006), 67-74.

⁹³ Eagleton, 'Political Beckett?', 71.

⁹⁴ Eagleton, 'Political Beckett?', 72.

The history of Marxist readings of Joyce and Beckett are instructive, in that it tells us as much or more about Marxism's reaction to modernism than it does about these writers as such. Joyce's great work, *Ulysses*, appeared in 1922, at a time when the Bolshevik Revolution was still new, and still seemed to be full of promise, and a time when the path to a post-capitalist future, and to a post-capitalist art, still seemed to be wide open. In that context, many (though not all) Marxists were understandably sceptical about a modernism whose temper seemed anti-democratic (as the art of Eliot, Pound, Yeats and some of the avant-garde movements certainly were) or to express only a sense of the futility of modern life. Some Marxists at this juncture, a minority perhaps, saw in modernism's hostility to bourgeois values and in its formal experimentation an affinity with socialism's own value system. But in the 1930s, as the coming clash between fascism, capitalism and communism became more apparent, the pressure for a more committed, engaged art increased, and in this light the left generally appears to have become more impatient with the obscure and arcane dimensions of modernism. In the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, Marxism generally remained largely sceptical of modernism and the reception of Joyce in these decades reflects this scepticism, and sometimes downright hostility. Joyce's international reputation was made between the First and Second World Wars, but Beckett's was made after the Second World War. By then most leading Marxists in the West were no longer so confident about the promise of Bolshevism, and to many the horrors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima had stripped history generally of its promise. In the aftermath of such a catastrophically violent cataclysm, it was difficult to believe in historical progress or in the promise of any future redeemed by revolution. By then modernism was also much less novel, much more familiar and assimilated. Adorno's reading of Beckett, then, reflects this wider shift and

we find in 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' a Marxism shorn of revolutionary expectation discovering a modernism also shorn of modernism's great expectations.

We have seen in earlier chapters, particularly in our discussions of Anderson, Jameson and Bürger, that the contemporary reception is often steeped in a sense of admiration for what modernism had attempted and in a sense of melancholy for what it had apparently failed to achieved. Modernism, that is, is admired for its 'revolutionary' antipathy to bourgeois capitalism, but the failure of modernism or of the avant-gardes to resist commodification is acknowledged as is their displacement by postmodernism by the end of the twentieth century. With its mixture of melancholy, historical despair and stubborn commitment to struggle even in conditions of hopelessness, Adorno's 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*' anticipates the temper of late-twentieth century Marxist responses to modernism more generally. It is this that makes it a pivotal text in the wider history of Marxist responses to modernism.

5.4 Materialist Conceptions of Irish Modernism

Joyce's early socialist critics might have been forgiven for ignoring the Irish context of Joyce's writing. Not only were copies of *Ulysses* still hard to obtain, but there was also no strong body of Irish criticism on Joyce's writing.⁹⁵ When Adorno wrote his essay on *Endgame* in 1961, Beckett, too, was still widely regarded as an essentially French writer

⁹⁵ While it can be argued that early twentieth-century Irish literary criticism made no decisive contribution to the understanding of Joyce's work, a number of valuable studies were published by Irish critics. Representative examples of some of this work can be found in the 1970 collection, edited by John Ryan, *A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish*, which included a number of essays reprinted from a 1951 special edition of the Irish journal *Envoy*. However, while Ryan stresses in his introduction to the collection that 'Joyce was quintessentially an Irishman' and that this is 'a book by Irish writers about an Irish writer' rather than a contribution to Joycean scholarship, there is still little emphasis or analysis on how the Irish political context influenced and shaped Joyce's writing. See John Ryan ed., *A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish* (Brighton: Clifton Books, 1970), 14.

and there was still, at that point, no extensive corpus of Irish readings of Beckett. Nor were there in the 1960s any really strong and authoritative works on Irish modernism conceived as a comprehensive body of work in its own right.

The Anglophone Marxist cultural theory that is the subject of this dissertation comes to the subject of modernism later than either the early Soviet critics, or, than Adorno, and in a different global context. When Terry Eagleton wrote *Exiles and Émigrés* in 1970, or when Fredric Jameson wrote his Field Day pamphlet 'Modernism and Imperialism' in 1988, for example, a much stronger body of Irish work on modernism had already begun to emerge. The general thrust of this Irish work has been to reclaim the great Irish modernists, especially Joyce and Beckett, as Irish as well as 'world' writers and to 'Hibernicise' Irish modernism by locating it in deeper Irish socio-historical and literary contexts. Much of this criticism attempted to 'rescue' Joyce and Beckett from the largely English and American 'critical industries' that had gathered around them, but the attempt to situate these writers in a specifically Irish national context was by no means simply 'nationalist': such reclamation demanded by its very nature a strongly historicist and materialist thrust. As such, the attempt by Irish critics to locate Joyce and Beckett in terms of Irish historical and literary conditions ought to be of interest to Marxists since that task attempts to make good what was an obvious lacuna in earlier Marxist responses to these writers.⁹⁶

The outbreak of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland inevitably brought the politics of Irish literature to the fore and a number of key Irish critics began to be reread

⁹⁶ Colin MacCabe's *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1978), written from a poststructuralist perspective, was an important attempt to situate Joyce's work in its political and historical context. However, MacCabe argues that Joyce's work represents a fundamental rejection of nationalism and its politics. See Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. Second Edition (London: Macmillan, 1978).

Irish writing in terms of postcolonialism.⁹⁷ Such readings required a much more detailed attention to Joyce's and to Beckett's status as Irish writers than had typically been the case. It is not surprising therefore that Irish-born critics such as Seamus Deane, Luke Gibbons, Declan Kiberd, Emer Nolan and David Lloyd have been dominant figures in the production of these readings. While none of these figures are, strictly speaking, Marxists, they all draw, to varying extents, upon Marxist theory in their discussions of ideology and culture in Ireland.

One of the first and most important attempts by an Irish critic to rehistoricise the work of Joyce and Beckett was Seamus Deane's 1985 volume *Celtic Revivals*, a collection of essays written between 1971 and 1984.⁹⁸ Deane, drawing on the work of the Frankfurt School, in particular Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, argues that Irish writing needs to be understood in terms of a culture which is 'neither wholly national nor colonial but a product of both'.⁹⁹ In his essay 'James Joyce and Nationalism' (1982) Deane argues that Joyce makes explicit what writers like Yeats and Synge can only imply, that the creation of an authentic culture depends not on a redemptive vision of culture expressed in a reductive 'authentic' realism, but on the ability to confront that

⁹⁷ Andrew Gibson remarks that when trying to historicise Joyce in the 1980s there was 'little to work with apart from scattered writings by Seamus Deane'. See Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in "Ulysses"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), vii.

⁹⁸ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber, 1985). In the 1980s, when theoretical readings of Joyce were beginning to dominate the British and American academics Deane continued to make the case for an Irish Joyce. The leading British publisher, Penguin appointed Deane general editor of Joyce's work for in its 'Twentieth-Century Classics' series. Deane himself edited *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Finnegans Wake*, and he commissioned major Irish critics for the remaining texts; Terence Browne edited *Dubliners*, J.C.C. Mays edited *Poems and Exiles* and Declan Kiberd edited *Ulysses*. Brooker argues that Deane's appointment was significant gesture 'in the "re-Irishing" of Joyce'. 'Penguin', he writes, had 'explicitly placed Joyce in the hands of an Irishman – more precisely, a neonationalist theorist of postcolonialism from Catholic Derry'. See Brooker, *Joyce's Critics*, 222.

⁹⁹ Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 11.

authentic culture and put it under critical pressure.¹⁰⁰ He rejects Lukács's charge that Joyce was indifferent to the historical realities of his time, arguing instead that Joyce 'learned from Irish nationalism the power of a vocabulary in bringing to existence that which otherwise had none except in the theatre of words'. Joyce, in other words, writes Deane, 'discovered the fictive nature of politics'.¹⁰¹ Deane rejects standard accounts of Irish modernism that create a false polarisation between Joyce and Yeats, where Yeats is devoted to the notion of an essential Irish national identity, while Joyce, in rejecting Ireland, celebrates cosmopolitanism and dislocation. Joyce, Deane contends, did not reject Irish nationalism. Rather, he understood nationalism as a powerful symbol 'of a rhetoric which imagined as true structures that did not and were never to exist outside language'.¹⁰² Nationalism, therefore, served Joyce in a similar manner to how it served Yeats – it allowed both writers to create an imaginative reality. Deane further explores this Joyce/Yeats dichotomy in *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea* (1984), a pamphlet that he wrote for the Field Day Theatre Company, of which he is a director.¹⁰³ Deane suggests that 'the great twins of the Revival', Joyce and Yeats, 'play out in posterity the roles assigned to them and to their readers by their inherited history'.¹⁰⁴ This polarisation of Yeats and Joyce is, for Deane, and 'inescapable and understandable'

¹⁰⁰ Seamus Deane, 'Joyce and Nationalism' was first published in *James Joyce: New Perspectives*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982). The essay was reprinted in *Celtic Revivals*, 92-107. [All references are to this edition].

¹⁰¹ Deane, 'Joyce and Nationalism', 105.

¹⁰² 'Joyce and Nationalism', 107.

¹⁰³ Seamus Deane, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1984). Reprinted in *Ireland's Field Day*, ed. Seamus Deane (London: Hutchinson/ Field Day Theatre Company, 1985), 33-42. [All references are to this edition] The Field Day Theatre Company, formed in 1980, produced a number of important and influential pamphlets on Irish history and literature. Leading critics and writers who contributed to Field Day's pamphlet series included: Terence Brown, Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton, Seamus Heaney, Fredric Jameson, Richard Kearney, Declan Kiberd, Tom Paulin and Edward Said.

¹⁰⁴ Deane, *Heroic Styles*, 57.

quality of the 'social and political realities' of the Irish colonial situation.¹⁰⁵ What is particularly important about this essay, and what Terry Eagleton will find most useful in the construction of his reading of Irish modernism, is that Deane clears the way for a different reading of Irish modernism, one that refuses to construct an adversarial relationship between Joyce and Yeats. As Terence Brown writes, Deane's essay 'provides a *terminus ad quem* to a debate about Irish Ireland inaugurated at the beginning of the century and clears the way for new readings of both Joyce and Yeats'.¹⁰⁶

Deane's work in *Celtic Revivals* and his later *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986) stressed the importance of understanding Irish writing in its historical and colonial context and these works influenced a whole generation of Irish critics.¹⁰⁷ The 1990 Field Day book, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (compiled and edited by Seamus Deane) can be seen to be a defining moment in the shift towards postcolonial readings of Irish literature.¹⁰⁸ In the wake of that publication a number of key texts by Irish critics, on Irish literary culture began to emerge. In an essay titled 'Montage, Modernism and the City' (1991), Luke Gibbons takes issue with Italian Marxist critic

¹⁰⁵ Deane, *Heroic Styles*, 58.

¹⁰⁶ Terence Brown, 'Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Critical Debate' in Brown, *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988), 87.

¹⁰⁷ Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986). Other essays of note that appeared in the 1980s and which placed Joyce in the context of Irish history and nationalism were Fredric Jameson's 'Ulysses in History' in W.J. McCormack and Alistair Stead, eds., *James Joyce and Modern Literature* (London: Routledge, 1982), 126-41, and Tom Paulin's 'The British Presence in Ulysses', *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984), 92-100.

¹⁰⁸ Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press / Field Day, 1990). The collection was a reprint of three pamphlets commissioned by the Field Day Theatre Company: Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*, Fredric Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism* and Edward Said, *Yeats and Decolonization*.

Franco Moretti's dismissal of Joyce's Irishness as a defining feature of his work.¹⁰⁹ Gibbons argues that what Moretti dismisses as the 'uneven and backward' elements of Irish development are the very aspects that 'exerted a dynamic and formative influence on Joyce'. Gibbons does not dismiss the importance of Joyce's contacts with European modernism, but he contends that 'they were enhanced and given greater intensity by his response to the cultural ferment in Ireland at the turn of the century'.¹¹⁰ For Gibbons, Irish history is a destabilising as opposed to a conservative force that operates in Joyce as both a pole of attraction and repulsion.¹¹¹

Declan Kiberd's 1995 volume *Inventing Ireland* focuses on the question of British colonialism and examines its capacity to make and remake the objects that it controls, even those which are seemingly the results of nationalist self-fashioning. Using the work of Frantz Fanon, Kiberd charts Ireland's emergence from colonial oppression through what he sees as 'a necessary nationalism' towards an ultimate but as yet unachieved, and somewhat utopian, liberation. Where Deane argues that the Revivalist version of 'Irishness' is a colonial creation, Kiberd contends that Ireland itself is an imperial invention and that the Revival invented new versions of Irishness to liberate the country from the stranglehold of British stereotypes and racial condescension.¹¹² Kiberd

¹⁰⁹ Luke Gibbons, 'Montage, Modernism and the City', *Irish Review*, No. 10 (Spring 1991). The essay was reprinted in Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, (Cork: Field Day/Cork University Press, 1996), 165-170. [All references are to this editions]. Franco Moretti's essay on Joyce, 'The Long Goodbye: *Ulysses* and the End of Liberal Capitalism', locates *Ulysses* within a specifically English form of capitalist crisis, viewing the Irish context of the novel as largely irrelevant since, he contends, Ireland was only a region of the United Kingdom at the time. For Moretti, there is a 'structural homology between the specific social nature of the British crisis' and 'the specific literary structure of *Ulysses*'. See Moretti, 'The Long Goodbye', *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 3-4.

¹¹⁰ Gibbons, 'Montage, Modernism and the City', 168.

¹¹¹ Gibbons, 'Montage, Modernism and the City', 169.

¹¹² Deane argues in 'Joyce the Irishman' that Joyce was 'formed by the Ireland he repudiated' and that the linguistic experiments of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are 'anticipated in the conflict between Irish, Hiberno-English and standard English which is a feature of the Irish writing Joyce knew'. See Seamus

writes: 'The English did not invade Ireland – rather, they seized a neighbouring island and invented the idea of Ireland. The notion "Ireland" is largely a fiction created by the rulers of England in response to specific needs at a precise moment in British history.'¹¹³ The central proposition in Kiberd's work is that 'Englishness' is constituted by declaring its 'not-Irishness' and that 'Irishness' in turn was invented by repudiating 'Englishness'. He reads Beckett's early novel *Murphy* as 'one of the earliest novels of immigrant life in Britain' arguing that it is 'a challenge to the stock English image of the stage Irishman'.¹¹⁴ Unlike Adorno, who reads *Endgame* as a play that reconstructs the historical negation of meaning, Kiberd finds in the play the revivalist theme of suffering and argues that *Endgame* is 'the study of suffering of characters who make themselves willing martyrs to an approved text'.¹¹⁵ For Kiberd, Beckett is similar to other Irish writers such as O'Casey who were appalled by the apparent willingness of human beings to submit themselves to suffering. In *Endgame*, Kiberd writes, 'habit has so deadened the servant that his eye can see only what it has been trained to see'.¹¹⁶ He even goes so far as to suggest that Beckett found in the remaking of France after the Nazi occupation during the Second World War, an 'image of an ideal Ireland of the future'.¹¹⁷

Both internationally and domestically, the critical reception of both Beckett and Joyce has been fashioned, in large part, by their perceived rejection of the aesthetics and

Deane, 'Joyce the Irishman' in Derek Attridge, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 31-2.

¹¹³ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 83. Here, Kiberd appears to be attempting to address Said's question about the nature of 'Orientalism': Is 'the Orient' a purely theoretical or discursive construct or does it involve the representation of a real object?

¹¹⁴ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 532-33.

¹¹⁵ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 545.

¹¹⁶ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 546.

¹¹⁷ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 550.

politics of the revival, and hence of Irish nationalism.¹¹⁸ Emer Nolan's *James Joyce and Nationalism* (1995) attempts to reclaim Joyce from an Anglophone liberal critical tradition that sees Irish modernism and nationalism in fundamentally oppositional terms. Nolan's work critiques what she perceives to be the false and misleading opposition that has been created between Irish nationalism and Joycean modernism.¹¹⁹ This opposition, Nolan argues, has resulted in a crucial critical failure to understand the complex role played by nationalism in the political culture of modernity.¹²⁰ She contends that 'the cliché of Joyce's "ambivalence" towards Ireland suggests mere confusion or ambiguity; we have overlooked the determinate nature of this response, which in fact corresponds to a dialectic fundamental to both nationalism and modernism'.¹²¹ Developing Deane's thesis in 'James Joyce and Nationalism' Nolan argues that while Joyce's 'writings about Ireland may not provide a coherent critique of either colonised or colonialist . . . their very ambiguities and hesitations testify to the uncertain, divided consciousness of the colonial subject, which he is unable to articulate in its full complexity outside his fiction.'¹²² Nationalism, she contends, in a manner Eagleton will reiterate later, always 'seeks to enable the people to enter into fully-fledged modernity, but tries to do so by

¹¹⁸ See Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Emer Nolan, 'Modernism and the Irish Revival' in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157-72.

¹¹⁹ Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995). See 'Introduction: Modernism and Nationalism', 1-22.

¹²⁰ A number of scholars have begun to argue that nationalism is an ambivalent response to modernity. It is neither a simple nostalgia for the past nor an unambiguous defence of tradition. See, for example, Michael Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Tratner argues that the work of modernists such as Joyce, Woolf and Yeats was preoccupied with how collective entities such as classes, genders and nationalities shape the individual mind within modernity.

¹²¹ Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism*, xiii.

¹²² Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism*, 133.

reinventing modernity on its own terms, by retaining something from an archaic, pre-modern form of community.’¹²³

When we consider it collectively, we can see that what was most important about the work of these Irish critics from Deane onwards was that they sought to explore and reconfigure the relationship between colonialism, modernism and modernity. One of the most important and ambitious attempts to advance this project was Terry Eagleton’s essay, ‘The Archaic Avant-Garde’ in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995). Eagleton’s essay is important for the purpose of this dissertation because it builds, both directly and indirectly, on the recent Irish criticism that we have just sketched and merges it with the debates on Marxism and modernism that we have already reviewed in earlier chapters. In so doing Eagleton produces an interesting and important synthesis of Irish and Marxian critical theory on modernism. As we already noted in Chapter One, Eagleton in *Exiles and Émigrés* had argued that the most successful practitioners of modernism in English were ‘foreigners and émigrés’ and cultural outsiders.¹²⁴ Taking the example of Joyce, Eagleton had argued that he exiled himself in Europe and ‘rejected that native lineage’ upon which Yeats drew, while simultaneously learning some valuable lessons from the Revivalists. This enabled Joyce to create an aesthetic and mythological framework within which the contemporary experience could be expressed and understood.¹²⁵ Joyce could reject both the Catholicism and nationalism which he inherited, and, at the same time, remain ‘enduringly indebted to [their] totalising forms’, within which art and religion, history and politics, could still be seen in

¹²³ Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism*, 110.

¹²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970).

¹²⁵ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 15.

terms of 'organic interconnection'.¹²⁶ Therefore, Joyce, like Yeats, displays a complex relationship to his own culture that was not, on the whole, reproduced in England. For Joyce, and indeed Yeats, it is the 'mode of myth' that allowed them to achieve a certain coherence: 'myth has again and again been offered as fulfilling the purposes which, in the work of [English novelists], could not be attained by a significant organization of ordinary experience'.¹²⁷

In his 1978 volume *Criticism and Ideology*, Eagleton had developed this question further. He asks: 'why . . . should it be that, at the heart of this felt disintegration [of English society], the great art of English literature should have been the work of foreigners and émigrés?'¹²⁸ The viewpoint from which Eagleton investigates the work of the 'foreigners and émigrés', Eliot, Lawrence, Pound, Yeats and Joyce, is that of social class. He argues that Joyce's petit-bourgeois Catholic nationalist background was an 'ideological sub-ensemble . . . which formed a contradictory unity with the dominant ideology' (of clerical reaction and imperialist oppression). This was then 'overdetermined by his expatriatism'.¹²⁹ Joyce's Irish, and later European, formations therefore ensured that his texts demonstrate both a close attention to the minute details of Dublin life and a critical distancing from it. Living in Europe, he could 'transcend Irish cultural provincialism'. And from European naturalism, he could derive the techniques that allowed for an obsessive concern with detail. Eagleton argues that *Ulysses* "resolves" [his quotation marks] the 'contradiction between "alienated" artistic consciousness (Stephen Dedalus) and material existence (Leopold Bloom) in its formal

¹²⁶ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 16.

¹²⁷ Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés*, 138.

¹²⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), 15.

¹²⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 156.

linkage of naturalist and mythological codes' but that this 'formal interpenetration' is an exhibition of structural irony, drawing attention to its 'synthetic basis in Homeric myth'. Thus, the contradiction between naturalist and mythological codes is not resolved formally; rather, it is 'satirically' exposed in the content of *Ulysses*, the 'unepiphanic non-event' of the meeting between Bloom and Stephen, 'the central absence around which the text's complexities knot'. Thus, Eagleton concludes, in *Ulysses* the unity of material life and artistic consciousness is achieved 'not *in* the work but *by* it'.¹³⁰

In that same work, Eagleton offers an important critical insight crucial to later Marxist theorising about Joyce when he argues that '[I]n its partial, parodic resemblance to a conventional naturalistic novel, *Ulysses* offers itself to the reader as a familiar commodity only to undercut that transaction by its difficulty and self-absorbedness, refusing commodity-status while paradoxically parading, in the crafted, compacted involutions of its every phase, the intensive labour which went into its production'.¹³¹ This argument depends, in part, on Eagleton's earlier observation that in the absence of a successful proletarian revolution in Ireland, 'Joyce's painful self-liberation from clericism and imperialism had to be achieved, materially and spiritually, through his art'.¹³²

¹³⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 156 [Eagleton's emphasis].

¹³¹ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 156.

¹³² Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 154-55. This point was later taken up by Trevor Williams in his book *Reading Joyce Politically* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997). Williams draws upon the work of Frantz Fanon and attempts to combine Marxist and postcolonial readings of Joyce. He locates Joyce's political power in the realm of style and drawing on Eagleton's argument in *Criticism and Ideology* argues for the possibility that the structure of *Ulysses* provides an analogy with the crisis of capitalism in its imperialist phase and thus 'reflects' the fragmentation experienced everywhere under capitalism. By reading Joyce 'politically' Williams reads Joyce primarily as a postcolonial writer and his approach relies on a Gramscian/Althusserian superstructural analysis rather than engaging with class, history or other aspects of the economic base.

In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, particularly in the chapter 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', Eagleton develops his earlier work on Irish modernism but now attempts to synthesise Marxist and Hibernian readings of Joyce and the Revival. In 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', Eagleton draws on Marxist debates on modernism including the work of Perry Anderson and Peter Bürger, but he also connects these Marxists readings with the Hibernicised readings of Joyce by Deane, Gibbons, Kiberd, Nolan and others that had begun to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. Using the Marxist concept of combined and uneven development, that Anderson had developed in his essay 'Modernity and Revolution' Eagleton contends that in Ireland tradition and modernity were uniquely interwoven: 'If rural Ireland was', he writes, 'a land of immemorial custom, it was also one of the earliest examples in Europe of a modern agrarian economy, with a classical capitalist rent system implanted by its seventeenth-century invaders.'¹³³ It was a country where the old and new existed in the form of strange conjunctures, with an 'archaic moral superstructure' serving 'an increasingly modern base'.¹³⁴ For example, Eagleton argues that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland could be considered as much a capitalist formation as Britain was. However, capitalism in Ireland was what Eagleton terms 'a woefully inert brand of rural capitalism, an old-fashioned form of modernity which lacked the challenge of an industrial middle-class'. And it was, curiously, to this rural middle class, 'one of the most conservative formations in western Europe' to

¹³³ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 275. Eagleton draws on the work of Cormac Ó Gráda, David Fitzpatrick and Kevin O'Neill for his socio-economic analysis of pre- and post-Famine Ireland. See Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), David Fitzpatrick, 'Ireland since 1870' in R. F. Foster, ed., *The Oxford History of Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 1992) and Kevin O'Neill, *Family and Farm in Pre-Famine Ireland: The Parish of Killashandra* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

¹³⁴ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 276.

whom the 'mantle of revolutionary modernism' was passed.¹³⁵ For Eagleton, the paradox of Irish modernism is that it emerges out of a decidedly rural and conservative society, a paradox that at face value appears to contradict the conventionally accepted idea that modernism occurs essentially in the more industrially advanced zones of metropolitan Europe.

Eagleton makes the important point, one that is sometimes ignored by crude mechanical Marxist historical readings, that modernity and peasant societies are not necessarily at odds. He writes:

The 1830s and 40s in Ireland witnessed an accelerating decline of traditional and popular culture, as a modern democracy began to take shape; yet 'Gaelic' culture was already from the eighteenth century a contradictory affair, as a politically self-consciousness Catholic middle class itself took a hand in burying a traditional Gaelic order with its modernizing projects.¹³⁶

Nineteenth-century Ireland was a fractured and traumatised society, haunted by the legacy of the Famine, agrarian revolution and the loss of a native culture and language. It was undergoing, as Eagleton argues, 'the transformation *within living memory*' of an entire social order, something which created 'a peculiarly shocking collision of the customary and the contemporary'.¹³⁷ It is within these unique circumstances that Irish modernism began to emerge:

The time of artistic modernism is a curiously suspended medium, a surreally foreshortened temporality in which the laws of orderly narrative are lifted so that time, much as in the dream or the unconscious mind, seems at once

¹³⁵ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 277.

¹³⁶ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 278.

¹³⁷ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 279 [Eagleton's emphasis].

fantastically speeded up and fixated upon certain images dredged from the depths of some ancient collective memory.¹³⁸

Drawing here on the work of Walter Benjamin, Eagleton contends that the rhythm of political revolution distorts the very concept of time itself. Ireland, in the aftermath of the Famine, was brought face-to-face 'with a paralysing past' while also seeking to 'briskly dispose of its debris' in order to create something 'authentically modern'.¹³⁹ By this reading Ireland was trapped between an immediate past it could not escape and a modernising future it could not quite reach. As Eagleton writes: '[W]hen the last [land] settlements finally arrived at the end of the nineteenth century, they offered the peasantry in modernizing style what they themselves regarded as their traditional rights'.¹⁴⁰

Modernism, thus understood, like nationalism, as had been theorised by Nolan in *James Joyce and Nationalism*, has a contradictory relationship to modernity. If modernism is an attempt to resist mass commodity culture, then nationalism can be understood as setting its own spirit of aristocracy against standardised English society, and therefore plays out in its own way the 'radical conservatism of so much modernist art'.¹⁴¹ Britain represents the Enlightenment, and nationalism is a product of the Enlightenment; therefore, the only way in which this contradiction can be resolved from an Irish nationalist standpoint is if the form of nationalism embraced is modernist, not modern. This allows nationalism to move simultaneously in two directions: It can turn its back on the English notion of modernity, while embracing its own ancient spirituality. However, this very act allows it to take a modernising leap forward and

¹³⁸ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 279-80.

¹³⁹ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 280.

¹⁴⁰ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 280.

¹⁴¹ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 280-81.

escape its own recent history. Thus, Eagleton concludes, '[l]ike modernism, nationalism will outflank the merely modern by turning to advantage the shattered time to which that era has reduced it.'¹⁴²

It is not difficult to locate Anderson's influence on Eagleton's work here. In particular, they share the idea that a traditional culture can provide a reservoir of resources for modernism. Irish nationalism found its origins and political target in a traditionalist land-owning order. Yet, it was the Revival, with its somewhat 'aristocratic' temper, that turned these cultural forms against the resented modernity of the petty-bourgeoisie and created an artistic experiment, that, for all its élitist tones, became part of the wider revolutionary project of nationalism. Linking modernism and nationalism, Eagleton argues that 'revolutionary nationalism unites the archaic and the avant-garde, inflecting what is in fact a modernizing project in the rhetoric of ancient rights and pieties. Nationalism is a desire to be modern on one's own terms; and since one is not yet modern, those terms can be nothing but traditional'.¹⁴³ The sources of modernism and nationalism have much in common; they are mutually contradictory in that they can be both progressive and reactionary. Therefore, as Eagleton argues, it is of no surprise that one of the major flourishings of literary modernism occurred not in the metropolitan core of London, the capital of empire, but in one of its most backward locations in Western Europe, Ireland.¹⁴⁴ As Eagleton writes, English '[r]ealism in art, empiricism in philosophy, the spiritual fruits of a middle-class civilisation, could offer no fertile ground for a futurism or surrealism'.¹⁴⁵ Neither did the international character of

¹⁴² Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 281.

¹⁴³ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 285.

¹⁴⁴ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 297f.

¹⁴⁵ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 298.

modernism appeal to an essentially self-confident inward-looking imperial culture. Ireland's position as a colonised space, adjacent to the metropolitan source of empire, allowed it a unique access to the dominant culture. In an ever more unified world, where time and place are increasingly homogenised, the 'no-place' and 'no-time' of the colony, with its splintered history and restrictive space, can quickly become symbolic of 'a condition of disinheritance' that can appear universal.¹⁴⁶

Modernism needs a traditional culture to react against, but in Ireland writers such as Yeats, Joyce and Beckett turned a fragmented cultural history to their benefit, exploiting, Eagleton contends, 'the very absence of a stable system of representation for its own audacious experiments'.¹⁴⁷ In a similar vein, Luke Gibbons had argued that 'Irish culture did not have to await modernity to undergo the effect of fragmentation – the cult of the fragment was itself the stuff from which history is made'.¹⁴⁸ A political history of violence, fragmentation and subjugation, will often impede a coherent realist narrative tradition. In his essay on '*Ulysses* in History', Frederic Jameson cites Roland Barthes in support of his observation that, under the impact of modernity, the distance between meaning and existence, the representation and the real, has widened:

The pure and simple 'presentation' of the 'real', the naked account of 'what is' (or what has been), thus proves to resist meaning; such resistance reconfirms the great mythic opposition between the *vécu* [that is, the experiential or what the existentialists called 'lived experience'] and the intelligible . . . as though, by some *de jure* exclusion, what lives is structurally incapable of carrying a meaning – and vice versa.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 298.

¹⁴⁷ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 298.

¹⁴⁸ Luke Gibbons, 'Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History' in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Field Day / Cork University Press, 1999), 159.

¹⁴⁹ Frederic Jameson, '*Ulysses* in History' in *James Joyce and Modern Literature*, eds. W. J. McCormack and Alistair Stead eds. (London: Routledge, 1982), 129.

Reality becomes dislocated from the structures of signification, and takes the form of random impression, a particular moment, or falls into the eventuality of the detail. For Ireland, it is history itself which is irretrievably scarred with the marks of contingency. But as David Lloyd has shown, the ruins of Irish history are not simply the result of a clash between nature and culture; rather, they were produced by a collision between several opposing cultures, 'the debris of a history of invasions'.¹⁵⁰

In Ireland, due of the intense proximity of politics to everyday life, the political situation is more complicated than it often appears to be. It is true, as Seamus Deane has pointed out, that a striking number of Irish writers – Joyce, Beckett, Francis Stuart, Patrick Kavanagh – rejected political or ideological classification, but they did so because they regarded politics 'as a threat to artistic integrity'.¹⁵¹ However, as Deane recognises, in a country in which politics is so vehemently contested, refusing to take a political position is a political position in itself, not a indicator of indifference. Thus, as Eagleton concludes, 'the art of Joyce or Yeats or O'Casey remains on terms with the political even when it turns contemptuously from it, or offers itself in its place'.¹⁵²

Ireland, while producing a high modernist literary culture, failed to produce an avant-garde. Eagleton, drawing now not on Anderson but on Peter Bürger's conception of the avant-garde also discussed earlier, argues that in Ireland there is 'little of that iconoclastic experiment which seeks to revolutionise the very conception and institution of art itself, along with its relations to political society'.¹⁵³ Modernism, Irish style, was, he claims, a 'peculiarly mandarin modernism' where 'the ancient triumphs over the

¹⁵⁰ David Lloyd, 'Adulteration and the Nation' in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 89.

¹⁵¹ Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 15.

¹⁵² Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 299.

¹⁵³ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 299.

contemporary'.¹⁵⁴ He advances a number of reasons for this distinctly Irish situation. Firstly, he suggests, Ireland was a deeply conservative society in which a culture of modernisation failed to materialise. Secondly, the production of Irish modernism was dominated by the Anglo-Irish. Drawing again on Anderson's analysis of the emergence of modernism in the *ancien regime* societies, Eagleton argues that the Anglo-Irish were a politically dispossessed group who defined themselves, by way of compensation, as cultural producers. It was a role that they could easily inhabit due to their socially privileged position, but one to which they brought the 'tones and assumptions' of their own inheritance:

The liberal Anglo-Irish were remarkably well-placed to provide the country with a modernist vanguard, as a displaced coterie with elitist instincts and cosmopolitan sympathies. Their 'in-betweenness', wedged as they were between London and Dublin, Big House and peasant cabin, was a version of the hybrid spirit of the European modernist, caught between diverse cultural codes . . . [T]he Anglo-Irish modernists were swept up in heady enthusiasm for the new Ireland about to be born while anxiously unsure of their role within it.¹⁵⁵

In other words, art offered the Anglo-Irish a sense of identity at a time and in a place when their identity was in flux. For Eagleton, the Anglo-Irish modernists insistence that one could live inside myth or language and the autonomy of work of art was in fact 'a defiant rationalisation' of their 'rootless condition'.¹⁵⁶ Thirdly, because the Revival was of a nationalist rather than a socialist character, the Anglo-Irish were able to play a leading role within it. Culture plays an important role within nationalism as it fosters a sense of history. Eagleton points out that just as Irish nationalism expressed itself in the

¹⁵⁴ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 300.

¹⁵⁵ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 300.

¹⁵⁶ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 300.

language of the ancient aristocracy, the Anglo-Irish attempted to represent themselves not as an elite but as a vanguard class. In order to achieve this, they formed an alliance with the Catholic middle class, thereby allowing themselves to achieve 'that most cherished ideal of every displaced intelligentsia, an active relationship with the people'.¹⁵⁷ It also meant that they could, briefly, restore their traditional leadership role at the very moment when the wider class to which they belonged was in fact experiencing historical disintegration.

The Revival, Eagleton contends, was not, in the classic sense of the term, an avant-garde movement. However, taken as a whole project, it did represent what he terms 'a quite astonishing transgression of the frontiers between the aesthetic and the social, of a distinctively avant-gardist kind'.¹⁵⁸ The Revivalist aristocracy can appear to be avant-gardist because 'they reject bourgeois realism from a pre-bourgeois standpoint'.¹⁵⁹ Eagleton argues that it is in the work of Joyce that these two strands come together:

Joyce's work reveals how the modern, pressed to an extreme, curves back into the sphere of primitive mythology – how the newly emergent world of international monopoly capitalism, with its tight-meshed connections, global forms, cyclical rhythms, interchangeable human beings and deep determining forces, issues once again in a mythical form of consciousness.¹⁶⁰

Eagleton concludes that if the progressive and the primitive can be turned against modernity it can also be used to destroy the 'aura of the archaic' and the modern can be revealed as simply another myth. Thus, if Joyce is the great mythologiser, he is also the great demythologiser who privileges no single myth.

¹⁵⁷ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 302.

¹⁵⁸ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 303.

¹⁵⁹ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 306.

¹⁶⁰ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 316.

While Eagleton's position is largely convincing, there are some difficulties with his analysis. As Joe Cleary suggests, he tends to presuppose 'too automatic and unmediated a connection between economic base and culture'. He seems to assume that that a rural society and a rural middle class are incapable of producing anything other than a reactionary ruralist culture or only a very mandarin version of modernism. For Eagleton, in other words, Irish modernism remains for all its brilliance, a rather conservative modernism because it was the product of a few individual geniuses working in isolation and because no collectivist avant-garde movements along continental lines emerged. Yeats, Joyce and Beckett created radical modernist masterpieces, but, unlike the Dadaists or individuals like Duchamp say, they never challenged the authority of the cultural institutions that mediated art to the general public. Irish modernism may have been intellectually radical, but because it did not challenge the institutional structures of the art world in the way the European avant-gardes did, it lacked a radical democratic thrust. Joe Cleary suggests that Eagleton is too slavishly following Bürger here. The European avant-gardes emerged after all in metropolitan European states which had often been absolutist regimes and imperial centres and which had as such very developed networks of cultural institutions. The avant-gardes felt these old institutions to be stifling modern art and wanted to break from them. Cleary argues that since Ireland had long been a colonial periphery of England it had no such advanced network of institutions for the radical movements to attack. The Gaelic aristocracy had been broken up and the Catholic Church suppressed until the 1800s so the patronage of the arts by church and nobility along European lines had not happened in Ireland to anything like the degree that it had in places such as France, Spain, Italy or Germany. If Ireland did not produce a continental-style avant-

garde there were very good historical reasons for this and to attribute this to Revivalist conservatism was to mistake the differences between colonial and imperial social formations. In some instances, Cleary infers, Eagleton seems to be driven more by the theoretical frameworks of his Marxist contemporaries, such as Bürger, than by a close materialist analysis of the actualities of the Irish situation.¹⁶¹

Whatever its minor flaws, Eagleton's work has been important in highlighting the complexity of Irish modernism and in grounding contemporary Anglophone debates on modernism as well. His argument that the agonistic relationship between the archaic and the modern creates the ideal conditions for the emergence of modernism has found wide acceptance.¹⁶² More importantly, his work has offered a convincing explanation for why Irish modernism may be perceived as simultaneously both radical and conservative, arguing that the Revivalist Anglo-Irish intelligentsia monopolised modernism by translating a felt sense of political dispossession into cultural production. This Anglo-Irish 'in-betweenness', Eagleton contends, was 'a version of the hybrid spirit of the European modernist, caught between diverse cultural codes'. The Anglo-Irish Revivalists recourse to 'the celebrated formalism and aestheticism of the modernists',

¹⁶¹ Cleary, 'Towards a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature', 217. Cleary's explanation for Irish modernism focuses, not on the peculiarities of the rural middle classes, but on the particularities of Ireland's imperial history. He argues that the Famine in Ireland 'represented a merciless and accelerated convulsion' of the Second Industrial Revolution, 'decimating the subaltern classes, accelerating the exodus from the land to the core industrial centres of England and America, compelling a shift to very different new property regimes at home, and not least, dealing a final death blow to Gaelic culture' (218-19). Therefore, the cultural dynamic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century played out very differently in Ireland compared to the rest of Europe. In Russia and Italy, debates about the liberating possibilities of technology made sense in societies that felt smothered by the sheer excesses of their history. In colonially oppressed and famine-ravaged Ireland, the terms of debate were very different; the obsession was not how to abandon the excess of history but how to salvage a cultural past that had been all but destroyed. Therefore, the Irish Revival cannot be seen as a singular phenomenon; rather, it must be understood as a complicated 'matrix' of cultural responses to the legacy of the famine and the Irish attempt to come to term with the trauma of a colonial past (220-21).

¹⁶² See, for example, Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Emer Nolan, 'Modernism and the Irish revival' in Cleary and Connolly, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, 157-172.

was, as Eagleton concludes, both an effective and defiant 'rationalisation of their own rootless condition'.¹⁶³

Eagleton's work draws widely on Irish critical discussions of modernism and merges them with the debates on Marxism and modernism that we have reviewed earlier in order to develop his own leftist analysis of Irish modernism. In early Marxist debates on modernism, Lúkcacs and the Soviet critics had dismissed Joyce as a naturalist and a bourgeois decadent. Eagleton acknowledges the extent of the debt that Joyce owes to naturalism but he argues that Joyce's naturalism needs to be understood in relation to Joyce's capacity to combine it with other currents. Eagleton clearly understands his project in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* as a further exploration of the thesis he began more than thirty years earlier in *Exiles and Émigrés*. His account of Irish modernism borrows its organising framework from Perry Anderson, citing both his 1968 essay 'Components of the National Culture' and his 1984 essay 'Modernity and Revolution' as key influences on his argument. In particular, Eagleton takes from Anderson the concept of combined and uneven development as an explanation for the emergence of modernism in peripheral regions such as Ireland as opposed to a core metropolitan regions like London. However, Eagleton's enthusiasm for modernism is tempered by an insistence on the 'mandarin' and conservative character of Irish modernism. Here, he utilises Peter Bürger's analysis of the avant-garde in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger contends that the avant-garde represented the most radical version of modernism because the work of the avant-garde challenged not just the form and content of traditional art, but it assaulted the institutions of art themselves. Eagleton argues that in the case of Irish modernism, while it produced three of the world's leading figures in

¹⁶³ Eagleton, 'The Archaic Avant-Garde', 300.

literary modernism, the character of Irish modernism generally remained essentially conservative because it failed to create an avant-garde movement that was capable of challenging the existing and inherited institutions of art. Eagleton's synthesis of Marxian and Hibernian critical discourses allows him to create a very different, indeed more dialectical, reading of Irish modernism than either Lúkacs or Adorno had done. Drawing particularly on the work of Deane, Kiberd and Nolan, Eagleton stresses the historical context that shaped Irish modernism and concludes that modernism in Ireland cannot just be understood as anti-nationalist and exilic. Rather, the linguistic eccentricity and peculiar mixture of radicalism and conservatism that characterises Irish modernism must be understood as the outcome of the diverse colonial cultural traumas suffered by both Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Irish Ireland alike.

5.5 Conclusions

Eagleton's work is significant because it represents in broad outline the overall shift within Marxist criticism with respect to both modernism and critical theory. Ireland features prominently in contemporary Marxist accounts of modernism because, as a former colony, it offers a useful case study for Marxist literary critics wishing to theorise the relationship between modernism and imperialism. This relationship was pushed to the centre of contemporary theoretical debate in the 1980s and a whole new generation of Irish critics, working both at home and abroad, began to reconsider Irish modernist writing in terms of wider debates about modernism and modernity. The dominance of postcolonial theory in the Anglo-American academy led by critics such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha has generated a reconsideration of modernist writing in terms of the postcolonial world.

The Marxist approach to modernism begins in hostility with Lúkcacs's and the Soviet critics' bitter denunciation of Joyce and, by extension of modernism generally. The later appropriation of modernism by the Frankfurt School, exemplified by Adorno's valorisation of Beckett, dramatically transformed Marxism's relationship to modernism. Marxism now embraced modernism as the most radical and decisive aesthetic mode of the twentieth century. Modernism was viewed as the only art capable of registering the profound traumas of the twentieth century, a century of appalling genocide and human orchestrated catastrophe. On the surface, these two Marxist positions on modernism appeared to be diametrically opposed. However, what they shared was a rejection of any attempt to understand Beckett and Joyce in their own national context. Lúkcacs and the Soviet critics displayed little interest in or knowledge of Joyce as an Irish writer and Adorno had equally little interest in Beckett and Ireland and made no attempt to situate Beckett in the wider tradition of Irish modernist theatre. In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* Eagleton, working between Marxism, Irish Studies and postcolonial theory produces a much more strongly dialectical and historically located account of Irish modernism that simultaneously stresses both its radical and conservative nature. In Eagleton's account, Irish modernism is neither demonised, *à la* Lukács, as a decadent and reactionary phenomenon nor celebrated *à la* Adorno, as a quintessentially and wholly radical aesthetic. Instead, Eagleton argues that Irish modernism, like modernism more widely, was a mixed or hybrid formation, one that combined, in sometimes odd and unexpected ways, both deeply conservative and radically transformative impulses. Eagleton, in other words, is respectful of the achievements of Irish modernists but he is not blind to the limitations of what their art could achieve or aspired to achieve either. He is less convinced than Adorno's reading of *Endgame* appears to be, that the refusals

of modernism to accommodate the expectations of late-capitalist culture can be politically effective or that this is all that art can do. Because it is inflected by a typically late-twentieth-century Marxist sense of exhilaration and melancholia with respect to the achievements of modernism, Eagleton's 'The Archaic Avant-Garde' may well prove to be as resonant of its own historical moment as Lukács's or Adorno's writings on the topic now seems to be of their's.

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