

José Jiménez

Modernity as Aesthetics

1. The stylisation of experience

I have always considered that one of the best descriptions of the modern perception of experience is to be found in the two final verses of "Burnt Norton", the last of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "Ridiculous the waste sad time/Stretching before and after".

At the heart of the very *idea of modernity* there is a central reference to the *experience of time*, to a perception of *our age*, and our cultural situation as being different from other ages and other situations.

There are a great many conceptions of the meaning of the term *modernity*, but the very etymology of the word carries a direct reference to the *human and cultural experience of time*. Perhaps not so well known, however, is that the term *modernus*, used as both a noun and an adjective, was coined in medieval times from the adverb *modo*, which meant *recently, just now*. *Modernus* was used to express *topicality, our time, the present*.

But the concept of *modernity* only gained philosophical importance when it was used to define an *era of history*. And, here I would like to make an important point: it began to be used not to define just any era of history, but specifically of the *history of the West*, the process of our cultural tradition.

It was in Europe during the eighteenth century that people first became conscious of the present as *something different*, as a period distinct from the past. This was the century during which the nation states were consolidated as political entities, and an expansive economic dynamic with an inherent universalist impulse appeared. It was also at this time that secular thought began to take hold, finding its greatest support in the ideal of *enlightenment*.

It is true, however, that this consciousness of living in an age which was different from the past had already been felt before during the Renaissance. At that time the classification of the "three ages" which, with minor differences of nuance, is still used today was established: Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Modern Era.

The intense *temporal determination* of the category of *modernity* is

one of the basic reasons, if not the central motive, for the association of aesthetics and modernity, and for the underlying interrelation of their respective processes. It is precisely this idea that I wish to convey, in synthesis, with the formula *modernity as aesthetics*.

The establishment and development of modern culture was closely linked to the expansion of the aesthetic experience, to the growing omnipresence of a diffuse aestheticity. Consequently, theoretical reflection on the aesthetic experience, which was born at the same time as the idea of modernity, inevitably involves an investigation of the profile and destiny of that cultural period, the philosophy of the modern age.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the development of a culture and a world with values tending towards secularisation, towards what Max Weber called the "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) of the world, is the *aestheticisation or stylisation* of experience. Consequently, when we talk about the *modern experience*, we are also implicitly referring to this experience of aestheticisation.

The whole Baroque aesthetic world represented a precedent, prior to the specifically modern age, of this stylisation of experience. And it was in this framework that the reflections of Baltasar Gracián were produced. His concepts of *acuteness* and *art of genius* are, both points of reference for the analysis of the aesthetic phenomena and a guide for worldly behaviour, confronted with the increasingly complex nature of experience that had already taken place during the seventeenth century.

Gracián's influence on the development of the notion of genius and the philosophical category of wit was decisive, as was its effect on the philosophical aesthetics of German idealism.

On the other hand, aesthetics, as a stylisation of experience, was contributing to this awareness of the difference between the ages specific to the idea of modernity. At the same time, in the mid-eighteenth century, aesthetics became an independent theoretical discipline.

To sum up, when I talk about *modernity as aesthetics*, I am referring to three interlinked conceptual planes: the development of modernity as the awareness of existing in a different age, the process of the stylisation of experience, and the emergence of a new discipline, which until that time had not attained independent status within the philosophical tradition.

The emergence of aesthetics as a distinct theoretical discipline is often associated with the formulation of the name "Aesthetica" by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. First in his *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus* (Reflections on Poetry) in 1735, and later in 1750, with the work entitled *Aesthetica*.

However, many years before that, the Italian Giambattista Vico had already developed, around the idea of a *Scienza Nuova* (New Science), a proposal for a logic of the imagination that would be alternative, although

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still related, to rational logic. According to Vico, thinking about the aesthetic also implies opening oneself up to the consideration of the temporal process. He himself had a cyclical conception of time, and his theory of historical *corsi and ricorsi* still has possible applications in today's changing world.

In addition to the ideas of Vico and Baumgarten, a third aspect, which first appeared in France, was the consideration of the arts as a *system*, and the establishment of a profound conceptual nexus between the concepts of *art and beauty*. This also played a decisive role in the birth of Aesthetics. The writings of Father Charles Batteux and his adversary Denis Diderot presented the *fine arts* as a whole, as an integrated spiritual and institutional whole separate from other planes of human experience.

But, what was the effect of the appearance of this new theoretical discipline? Above all one of *iconic* materialisation: the configuration in *the world of representation* of the *ideal of humanity*, which occupies a central position in the different philosophies and the mental horizon of the Enlightenment.

If this ideal of humanity is at the very heart of the thought of Lessing or Kant, for example, the avatars of experience and those of thought itself gave rise to the ever increasing importance of the specifically aesthetic configuration of this ideal.

One of the most intense manifestations of the above is the reflection of the great poet Friedrich Schiller on the convulsive situation of his times based on his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. I refer in particular to his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).

Schiller's text was written in a mood of great disappointment, produced by the deviation of the ideals of emancipation and liberty of the French Revolution that had led in 1793 to the Reign of Terror. For Schiller, this episode was a dramatic experience: the failure of the enlightened proposal for a free, happy society and of the realisation of an ideal of justice.

But instead of rejecting this ideal of humanity, he conceived the need for a passage through aesthetics in order to attain it. "There is no other way to make sensitive man rational but first to make him aesthetic." (Schiller, 1795, 305). The aesthetic experience thus becomes a pre-condition of the free and rational society proposed by the enlightened ideal.

Schiller's proposal is eminently *formal*. If, from his point of view, "man should impose the law of his will on his inclinations", this can only be achieved "by way of the aesthetic culture, which subjects to the laws of beauty all those acts in which free will escapes both the natural and the rational laws, and which, *by the form it gives to the exterior existence, opens the way to interior existence.*" (Schiller, 1795, 315-317).

On the basis of Schiller's ideas, what I would like to emphasize, is not only that the aesthetic is a *pre-condition* of liberty and truth, but, more importantly, that if the aesthetic is the pre-condition of the ethical, and of knowledge, this is because it introduces us to the *experience of form*, which results in what is outside ourselves (the external experience) being articulated or *stylized as* internal experience. And it is important to note that Schiller's ideas reappeared in the utopian and formalist components of the avant-garde artistic movements of the early part of this century.

But this formal stylisation of the ideal of humanity presupposed ignoring the material aspects of life and existence. In Nietzsche, we find one of the earliest critiques of this process of the idealisation of the aesthetic form in the well-known distinction he made between the *real world* and the *apparent world* in his work *Twilight of the Idols*.

Nietzsche returned to the same idea in *Ecce Homo: The "real world"*, and the "apparent world", in even clearer terms: the *sham* world and reality. "Until now the lie of the ideal has been a curse weighing on reality, humanity itself has been tricked and deceived by this lie even in its most basic instincts, to the point of adoring values that are the opposite of those which would have ensured a flowering, a future, the elevated *right* to a future." (Nietzsche, 1888, 16).

This is a text which has been referred to on many occasions by Gianni Vattimo (see, for example, 1989, 107) who indicates that its most intense fulfillment took place with the advent of the society of mass media. In effect, if Nietzsche could talk about the *lie of idealism* representing an inversion with respect to the instincts and needs of life, what we are experiencing today is nothing less than the effective realisation of idealism: *the virtual form is becoming material experience*.

And this is an *aesthetic* effect, the result of the *omnipresent* aesthetic, of the *allenveloping* aesthetic, which structures and channels all the communicative and representational processes in our culture. The process of the stylisation of experience, which we have situated in parallel to the development of modernity, therefore achieved its most intense materialisation in the schematisation of form imposed by the mass media.

2. Critique of aestheticism

Our fin-de-siècle encourages the myth of the volatile, evanescent nature of experience. Everything revolves, everything changes, nothing is permanent. Ideas and life are emptied of their content so that they can be present in the simplistic and repetitive channels of the mass media. In fact, the effectiveness and power of persuasion of the media is based precisely on this simplicity and repetition; it lies at the heart of their technique. Let us understand each other: the messages must be simple and schematic, but

both their framework and human needs, the universal subject to the *dominant fugacity*.

In the field of aesthetics, which are well known, the difference between representation and the represented constitutes one of the fundamental elements presented by aesthetics. On the one hand, the *stylized representation*, and on the other, the *easier to stomach the real*, a certain remoteness. Obviously in the same way, the representation spread their black

But it is also true, the aesthetic vision which largely events, we can become of the *iconic curtain* and a new conceptual and representation of reality of the diminishing and arises from a gnoseological

Once again this is a critique of *mimesis* and truth. Now, more than the cultural implications of the *universal cavern*, in a dies, proximity with d

But I am talking about the technique I propose implies a simulacrum, but also of the conditions and ideas, both in every aspect of human experience, and consequently simulation, which in idealism with the icon

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both their framework and their consequences are of *great complexity*. The human needs, the universal values, the individual and social ideals, are subject to the *domination of the stereotype* and articulated by the sign of *fugacity*.

In the field of aesthetic reflection, this leads to a series of paradoxes, which are well known. For example, where can we now situate the difference between representation and reality? The experience of the Gulf War constitutes one of the best examples of the new *ethical undercurrent* presented by aesthetics. Our only "knowledge" of this war was a *highly stylized representation*, an eminently aesthetic representation that made it easier to stomach the military adventure, giving it a rather distant quality, a certain remoteness. The experience was like *seeing a film*. Thus, obviously in the same way as happens in all wars, crime, pain and destruction spread their black veil.

But it is also true, nonetheless, that despite the simplistic and aesthetic vision which large sectors of the world's population had of those events, we can become aware of the misleading and persuasive character of the *iconic curtain* stretched out in front of our minds. This gives rise to a new conceptual and philosophical horizon: the critique of the models of representation of reality begins with the *aesthetic critique*, the discovery of the diminishing and alienating character of the aestheticism of the masses from a gnoseologic and ethical point of view.

Once again this implies a *return* to the philosophy of Plato: to his critique of *mimesis* as schematic impoverishment and alienation from truth. Now, more than ever, and without having to accept all the ontological implications of the platonic theory of idea-form, we are prisoners in a *universal cavern*, in an *iconic cave*, where we confuse shadows with bodies, proximity with distance, and instantaneity with fugacity.

But I am talking about an inverted platonism, since the aesthetic critique I propose implies a rejection of the identification of experience with simulacrum, but also the vindication of the primacy of the body: sensations and ideas, both in their individual and their social dimension, in every aspect of human life. The body is the root of all aesthetic experience, and consequently the key to all the forms of dissimulation or simulation, which inevitably end up denying it. Hence the coincidence of idealism with the iconic curtain.

The paradoxes referred to above do not end here. Another, most important one is the blurring of the traditional boundaries of art. While *Art* in the Renaissance tradition took the form of the *privileged institutional universe* of the aesthetic experience, the process of formalisation was later on inserted into life itself, into the very nerve centre of modern culture, and led progressively to an overflow of the privileged status of the aesthetic in art, and up to the presence of the

aesthetic *in everyday life*, in the quotidian existence. At this point, we come back to the implications of the development of modern *industrial design*, and even to the important precedent of William Morris's attempt in the nineteenth century to merge the so-called *fine arts* with the *decorative or ornamental arts*. The foundation of the *Bauhaus* by Walter Gropius in 1919, with a program calling for the *vital integration* of all the planes of aesthetic experience, definitively implied the breakthrough of a new perspective in which, culturally, Art tended to cease being the principal or privileged space of the aesthetic experience.

The exceptional and unique character of works of art, a quality that was fundamental to the legitimatization of the so-called *eternity of art*, gave way to the *mass production of aesthetic objects*, so that *contingency and fugacity* became part, and a central part, of the new aesthetic framework, a framework which was inevitably *convulsed* and undergoing *rapid change*. This can be seen in the impulse to unite art and life, and in the profound trauma that accompanied the birth of the avant-garde artistic movements of this century.

We cannot help noticing that the traditional idea of Art presupposed the existence of a *split*, a schism between spiritual aesthetic on a higher plane, and mere sensitivity on the lower plane. When the development of industry and urban life gave rise to the formation of mass societies, the appearance of a demand for mass aesthetic consumption implied an intention to deny this split.

We all feel that we are the trustees of the *titles* which legitimize access to Art. And, above all, we all try to surround ourselves in our daily life with a maximum of comfort and well-being, and to make tangible every day the formerly unattainable halo of *beauty*. As a result of technology, the *prototype* is opposing the unique work as the depository of a broader segment of aestheticity. Finally, the old split inevitably becomes highly problematic.

This brings us to the paradoxes present in all our minds: what is of greater aesthetic force, any piece of industrial design which we come across on the street (a new model of car, for example), or the old traditional forms of secular art? Or, to pose the question in another way: what has more force, the hyperaestheticised language of advertising, or the traditional language of art? Sometimes, this paradox has been resolved by the artists themselves assuming the role of publicity agent and advertising executive. The first artist to do this was Andy Warhol, and this reflects both his perceptiveness and his awareness of the levelling *down* of aesthetic expression, in a sort of technical homogeneity. His background was in advertising, and his attitude was one of the most radical ways of impugning the myth of artistic genius. Anybody with sufficient knowledge of communication technology could claim the status once only granted to artists. The common man could occupy the same level as

Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo. Let us think of Jefferson and try to ascertain whether his works have to do with the artistic or the political.

This peculiar derivation of the aesthetic into the egalitarian and democratic, that is rather unwelcome, is the *mass media and its culture*, which maintain its aesthetic, capable of opening up the privilege of the spiritual until now.

3. The new porosity of the aesthetic

Where does it spring from? It is born of the blurring of its boundaries, of the aesthetic in everyday life, of the aesthetic in the actual process of life.

But at this point I propose a hypothesis: if modernity is the formalisation of experience, that the idea of *novelty* and *newness* is inscribed in the process, wherefrom it emerges. The need for *technological progress* secretes a mental process on any plane of experience, and inevitably tends to be a *ception of time*, one of the roots of the intensification of the aesthetic.

Following the footprints of the genealogy of modernity, the role played by *novelty* and *legory* in the epoch (1935, 186) indicates the value of the merchandise, the origin of this unconscious. It is the tireless agent is fashion.

Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo. And as history repeats itself like a farce, let us think of Jeff Koons because it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether his works are a search for pure *public impact*, advertising, or have to do with the artistic experience.

This peculiar derivation of the *American dream*, and its undeniably egalitarian and democratic bias, presupposes the recognition of a truth that is rather unwelcome to elitist spirits: *art has lost the battle with the mass media and its communications technology*. And if it wishes to maintain its aesthetic, conceptual, poetic and sensitive vigour, it must be capable of opening up new anthropological spaces, outside the secular privilege of the spiritualist split that has been the basis of its legitimacy until now.

3. The new porosity of time

Where does it spring from, this situation of *malaise* immanent in art caused by the blurring of its traditional boundaries in the face of the expansion of the aesthetic in everyday life? I will say it again: this expansion of the aesthetic in everyday life as the *pure stylisation* of experience is inherent in the actual process of modern culture.

But at this point I would like to put forward a new philosophical hypothesis: if modernity entails an increasingly accelerated process of the formalisation of experience, this has to do above all with the importance that the idea of *novelty* has attained in modern society. The quality of *newness* is inscribed in the very heart of the commercial production process, wherefrom it expands into every dimension of the social universe. The need for *technological innovation* as a way to increase commercial profits secretes a mental sediment in which the *new* or the *most recent* on any plane of experience is better than everything that went before, which inevitably tends to be seen as obsolete. With respect to the *cultural perception of time*, one of the key aspects in art and the aesthetic experience is a *vertiginous increase in its speed, in temporal rhythm*, which is at the root of the intensification of the feeling of rootlessness in modern man.

Following the footsteps of Baudelaire and attempting to reconstruct the genealogy of modernity, Walter Benjamin commented on the central role played by *novelty* in our times, comparing it to the role played by allegory in the epoch immediately before, the Baroque age. Benjamin (1935, 186) indicates that "newness is a quality independent of the useful value of the merchandise". And he describes it in the following words: "It is the origin of this untransferable halo of images produced by the collective subconscious. It is the quintessence of the false consciousness whose tireless agent is fashion".

In effect, the halo of the new hovers over all the spaces of the modern mind and sensibility. This implies an increasingly intense *acceleration* of the temporal flux (*devenir tempora*) and of experience, and at the same time a process of *emptying* of the same; thus, present time and our experience are becoming increasingly empty.

Nietzsche (1873, 73) had already said: "we moderns have absolutely nothing of our own; only by filling us up, to an excess, with epochs, customs, arts, philosophies, religions and sundry knowledge do we become worthy of attention, that is, walking encyclopedias". How could we not recognise ourselves in this merely accumulative, merely quantitative character of the modern experience, so intensely bound up with the predominance of novelty!

So, according to Nietzsche (1873, 72), "the most characteristic trait of modern man" would be like a set of mirrors, the contrast between the emptiness of the inner life and the purely external pretension of accumulation: "*the singular contrast between an interior for which there is no corresponding exterior and an exterior for which there is no corresponding interior, a contrast unknown to the ancients*".

This has important repercussions on the problem we are dealing with. Firstly, the modern tendency to conceal the inner emptiness, the absence or fragility of lifesustaining values, with purely exterior *appearance*, with the mere formal accumulation of fragments, superimposed and drawn from a wide variety of cultural worlds. The dissolution of mass-man in *anonymity* is the most intense manifestation of this formal attempt to camouflage the void, which to a critical eye cannot veil *the harshness of the conditions of the life and existence* of the modern individual.

Confronted with this harsh existence, the individual can oppose it with the radical gesture of suicide (once again we are in the domain of form, of *style*), which is a denial of anonymity and raises him to the passion of a specifically modern heroism.

Walter Benjamin (1938, 93), once again on the basis of Baudelaire, pointed out the heroic significance of modern suicide in contrast to the *flight towards death* implied by dissolution in anonymity, in itself a form of death: "The resistances with which modernity opposes man's natural productive impulse are not well balanced to his strengths. It is understandable that the individual becomes progressively paralysed and flees towards death. Modernity should come under the sign of suicide, the seal of a heroic will that refuses to concede anything to the attitude hostile to it. This suicide is not a rejection, but rather heroic passion".

The question is important because the harsh conditions of existence in modernity are, logically, also present in the world of art. And this explains the emergence of *an artistic heroism*, also specifically modern, which existed until the period between the two World Wars this century. If emptiness and fugacity are at the root of the harshness of existence, the

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artist who, following Baudelaire's program, tries to go beyond and to combine "the transitory, the fugitive, and the contingent", also specifically modern, with the eternal and the immutable, becomes a new species of *civilising hero*, a new Prometheus.

But even more: the modern artist is not only in the *vanguard* of humanity, he also tenders his work and his life as an *offering*. This presupposes the formation of what I have called *the sacrificial myth of the modern artist*, a variation of the secular legend which presents artists as people with different traits and characteristics from other human beings.

The modern artist is committed to the difficult task of rescuing the *eternal* in the vertiginous decanting of the purely transitory. This was at the root, for example, of the sacrificial attitude of Vincent Van Gogh, of this "giving of oneself" so that humanity can go beyond the metamorphic process of the modern. The same attitude can be found in Antonin Artaud. In literature, it was also outlined in the three fundamental prototypes of artists who appear in the work of Thomas Mann: Tonio Kröger, Gustav von Aschenbach and Adrian Leverkühn.

But let us return to Baudelaire. In this writer the difficult rescue task of the artist who sacrifices himself is closely bound up with the assumption of the *contingency* of his activity, of his belonging to this *vertiginous and empty time* which characterises modernity. Thus he poses the question: "In a word, for all *modern* to be worthy of becoming antiquity it is necessary that the mysterious beauty which human life involuntarily puts into it is extracted (...). Unfortunate the wretch who studies in the old something other than pure art, logic, general method. Throwing himself too far into it he loses all memory of the present - he abdicates from the value and privileges provided by circumstance; for nearly all our originality comes from the seal that time imprints on our sensations". (Baudelaire, 1863, 695).

In this truly crucial text we find the crux of the deep *uneasiness* which stirs up modern art. Artistic activity has always required a qualified appropriation of the temporal flow, a projection going beyond the past and the future of the *instants of plenitude* that love, religion, and aesthetic experience make possible in life. But when time itself has become emptier and more inapprehensible than ever, the search becomes more complicated and can end in torture or tragedy. Neither is the nostalgic backward glance of any use: the only live thing that the artist can extract from the past is *formal logic*. A commitment to one's own time is the only path for the aesthetic *transcendence of the temporal flux*.

On the other hand, if the development of modernity is above all, as I have been saying, a process involving the intensification of the *formalisation of experience*, this also signifies an experience of accelerated contingency, the intensification of the feeling that life is ephemeral and time

transient, which causes us to lose our footing.

The aim of art, which occupies anthropological spaces previously occupied by religion, is to go beyond the biting harshness of this bare contingency, but it can achieve this only by acting on the metamorphic present.

Here, however, we encounter a new problem. To a certain extent the ever more intense process of the formalisation of experience inherent in the development of modernity has led recently to an important *qualitative variation* in the experience and representation of time. By this I mean, basically, the bankruptcy of the linear sense of the flux, which I consider to be an eminently *aesthetic* bankruptcy. For in my opinion it is caused by the *enveloping and circular way* with which an intense generalised and diffuse aestheticism has been shaping all the spaces of our lives. The dreams and emotions of the individual as well as the political and social ideals have been confronted with a hyperaestheticised, formal universe, where the before and the after dissolve in pure instantaneity.

This needs to be seen in relation to two aspects of the technology of the mass culture which are decisive. Firstly, the ability to *fix, detain or freeze* time which, since the nineteenth century has been supplied by photography. Secondly, the possibility of *advancing or turning back* the sequence of images that has been brought within our reach by the video. It is as if the actual law of the formalisation of the quotidian experience had been qualitatively transformed, taking us from the accumulative and the linear to a ruptured time in which everything comes and goes, to an eminently *circular* time.

The spectacular changes taking place in our world, and in particular the acute crisis of legitimacy that led to the disappearance of what was called *real socialism* undoubtedly have something to do with this new circular and enveloping configuration, eminently aesthetic and eminently modern.

But the configuration of the aesthetic experience itself and its temporal base also change. At the beginning of modernity, Faust made a bet with Mephistopheles about his capacity to not want to detain the *aesthetic instant*, the beautiful moment of plenitude, something that would have meant a break in the linear flow of time, which is the medium of the *will to act* characteristic of the modern spirit. But today this linear and accumulative time offers more lines of escape than ever, it has become intensely *porous*.

In the end, the process of the identification of aesthetic formalisation with modern temporality will lead to an *interiorisation* of the *experience of time as metamorphosis*, and of the *intercommunication between the individual body and the historical process*. I come back, once again, to

Burnt Norton by Eliot: the weakness of the condemnation/Which flesh

The new and intense anchors of the sense that the destiny of aesthetics is linked. And only aesthetics can plough the temporal flux, opened up by the modern, ploughed up by the modern, this way can the bright the instant.

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Translation from Spanish

Burnt Norton by Eliot: "Yet the enchainment of past and future/Woven in the weakness of the changing body/Protects mankind from heaven and damnation/Which flesh cannot endure."

The new and intense *porosity of time* places us in a situation in which the anchors of the senses are more problematic than ever. But we do know that the destiny of aesthetics and that of modern culture are intimately linked. And only aesthetics, as experience and radical commitment with the temporal flux, opening up to new art, virgin spaces, resistant and not ploughed up by the mass media, *can break the aestheticisation*. Only in this way can the brightness shine of *a time of plenitude* regained beyond the instant.

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