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- Autumn/Winter 2006

Contextual Essays

Artists

'Is Modernity our Antiquity?'

Mark Lewis

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Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.
- G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*

By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.

- Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life'²

Vancouver

For five years now, every time I am back in Vancouver, I have been taking pictures of a small modernist apartment building that sits very close to Stanley Park, the large and beautiful urban park that borders the centre of the city. I have been taking pictures because one day I imagine that I might make a film there. I am not sure what this film will be: if it should be 'about' the building, or whether the building will simply feature as a part of a larger landscape. Regardless, it's the building that I have been drawn to. And even though I have taken hundreds of photographs and hours of video footage, I still am not sure if I am any closer to knowing what to do with this building than I was when I first saw it five years ago. When I lived in Vancouver I must have walked or cycled past the building hundreds of times without ever noticing it. It seems mildly significant that my fixation or compulsion should begin only after I moved away to a country (England) where modernist architecture is not only hard to find, but its reputation, until recently at least, has been rather battered and neglected. Is it this relative absence at 'home', I wonder, that compels me to notice this form elsewhere?

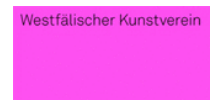
Now a foreigner in my own town, Vancouver is exotic and unknown to me in a way that it never was before. But the question remains as to what it is that continues to draw me to this modernist form, and why I continue to feel that I can make a work from it or about it. This question has made me reflect more generally on the whole idea of taking identifiably modernist forms as the subject, in one way or another, of a contemporary work. Why, for instance, are so many artists drawn to modernist forms and landmarks that are slowly crumbling and disappearing in Vancouver and everywhere else? And if they are not crumbling and disappearing, then often they are being lovingly restored and transformed into museum pieces of the period; on the face of it, just a part of the same phenomenon.

In some regards it is composition that the Vancouver building foregrounds: the volumes, shapes, curves and complex juxtapositions when looking at it from certain viewpoints. For me this phenomenon is strongest and most compelling on the peripheral edges of the building: the rear exterior and the 'visitor's parking' area. This building, then, presents compositional opportunities. Similar to many others buildings like it, it is almost already an image in both complicated and simple ways. Point your camera at any 'good' modernist building and the blocking, the cubic forms, the mixed and contradictory volumes that are created through compelling and vital montage - this is what these buildings already articulate against their respective backgrounds.

The apartment block in Vancouver carries on its surface the recognisable signs of a modernist history. In terms of architectural history we might want to call it a modest example of the high modern. Its modesty is achieved, I think, because although attention is certainly what it demands (all modernist forms do this, in one way or another) its function as a middle-sized apartment block built in the early 1960s in the then small coastal city of Vancouver means that it cannot have expected too much. Today other newer buildings that cry out for much more attention surround it: the latter are brash, loud and bullish in their demand for 'exclusive' views of the surrounding ocean and mountains. They have been built in front of the simpler modern structures of the 1950s and 60s, often destroying or occupying their old grounds. 'My' building, of course, remains standing, and it has resisted (temporarily) any contemporary 'remodelling', though it has started to look more than a little neglected: its paint is peeling; the concrete has started to crumble here and there softening the building's hard angular edges; and the 'visitor's parking' area is no longer level but slopes rather aimlessly towards its northern perimeter.



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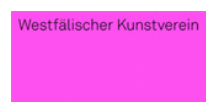
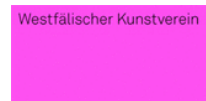


Alarming, it occurs to me that this disintegration and decay might be the real reason why I am drawn to this building, and why I continue to think that it may have something to reveal (don't I secretly pray each time I visit the location that some massive renovation and/or restoration has not taken place?) The idea of a modernist ruin in the making, while compellingly seductive, seems depressingly elegiac and tautological at best. Didn't the images and forms of modernism already have ruin, decay and obsolescence written into them? Was this not meant to serve as an inbuilt apotropaic function, all the better to protect against the future romantic appeal of their ruining? And do I really want to make an elegy to something like 'modernism's forgotten promise'? There's the rub. For today it is fundamentally a question of our relationship to these recently past forms, a question of what is to be done as the artistic signs and images of emerging and developing modernity are rapidly becoming historical. It can be quite disconcerting, I think, to recognise just how fast this has happened, to acknowledge that high-modernist forms have become historical ones. By this I mean that we can no longer fully identify with them, as they belong to a different time, to a different knowledge, and finally, of course, to a different ambition. On the other hand, it may be important to recognise that this impression we have that our modern forms are rapidly accruing a sense of 'pastness' is in part the result of our contemporary cult of the past. Bruno Latour wants to argue that this cult of the past - this need to at one and the same time conjure the past, revere it, excise it and destroy it - extends to the very heart of modernism and is in the end what undermines modernism from within, in fact what makes modernism not modern at all.³ I want to touch on this in a moment, but suffice it to say here that the massive building worldwide of new museums of contemporary art, presumably to provide for and continue the historicisation of objects, forms and ideas from where the museums of modern art have only recently left off, suggests that this obsession with 'instant antiquity' is not entirely imaginary.

The real problem, I suppose, is how to represent this passage (from modern to historical) without succumbing to a melancholic reverie; and, moreover, how to try and give form to this when by its very name, modernism came to stand for those artistic forms where, metaphorically at least, the present waged a perpetual war on the past. The name we give to this war is iconoclasm, and while modernism may have more or less banned the pre-modern tradition of the actual material destruction of works, iconoclasm was internalised as a metaphorical a priori of modernism. A sense of iconoclasm gave fuel to the latter's sense of invention and history, and in particular to how many of its leading practitioners conceived of their own work: 'Previously a picture was a sum of additions. With me a picture is a sum of destructions' (Picasso); and 'the destruction of old forms was a condition for the creation of new, higher forms' (Mondrian). Following Adorno, we perhaps need to think of the categories of decline (of old forms) less as categories of destruction, but rather as categories of transition. If modernism is indeed now historical, then this surely raises the question of transition as a return to the question of the end of art, the very condition for art that Hegel had already announced in the 1820s. But is this necessary state of transition, knowing and acknowledging that things are changing rapidly and that the promise of yesterday is no longer (nor ever will be) the realisation of today - is this the same thing as assuming an antiquity for our immediate past? Adorno opened his *Aesthetic Theory* with the now-famous declaration, 'It is self evident that nothing concerning art is self evident anymore, nor its inner life, nor its relation to the world, nor even its right to exist.'⁴ Art, says Adorno, takes refuge in its own negation, hoping to survive through its death. This negation must extend, a fortiori, to the idea of art's relationship to its past forms, no matter how immediate or far away.

If we accept that we are modern and that we continue to live in the time of modernity, then we know that modernist representational forms have staked their legibility and 'success' in the figuring of other futures, necessarily utopian, in the possibilities of modernity. The building in Vancouver is rather modest in this regard. At the same time I acknowledge that to think about modesty as part of the ambition of modernism is almost paradoxical. But sometimes I think modesty is, quite perversely, smuggled in, not noticed at first (a modesty not noticed is a strange tautology, in fact a modest modesty). And maybe that modesty is only recognisable now, some 50 years after the building was completed. If the latter is true, this speaks to how an archaeology of the modern might reveal unexpected, perhaps inexplicable results - we look to the (monumental) history of modernism to tell us something about the conflicts at the heart of the modern, about the latter's failure to make us free, its failure to

Yto Barrada: Riffs, 15.4-19.6



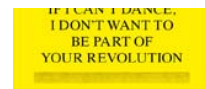
provide us with a future that we might recognise ourselves in. In the end, this may not be so very different from the desire to find the truth in the classical past. Paradoxically, a building or form not noticed (too much) with regards to the large ambitions for future change and organisation may be one that has failed to become properly past, failed to become historical.

In a struggle to define the feeling and form of a future modernity, modesty is just one contemporary retrospective sign that speaks to the inscrutability of the former ambition. In other words: do we really know what this building has wanted, when its formal propositions now seem so modest? And for me, in order to proceed it is important to keep 'its' desire in the present imperfect, to acknowledge that it might just continue 'wanting'. Its modesty is perhaps just another way of saying that we do not yet understand its relationship to the future.

Modernism and Antiquity

Others set the subject of this essay. As a magazine we were invited to provide a text that would address the proposition 'Is modernity our antiquity?' It is immediately obvious that this formulation presents something of a paradox. On the face of it, can there be anything more paradoxical than a modernity that is also antique? In one sense to be modern is to be of today, and this indexicality bears with it the strict obligation that what is referred to not only not be antique, but in some respects that it needs to learn how to forget (or even destroy) the latter. It is Baudelaire who defines and bequeaths to us the contemporary meaning and usage of the word modernity in an art context. In 'The Painter of Modern Life', Baudelaire argues that modernity is the requirement that art be of its own present: 'The pleasure which we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty which can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present'.⁵ For Baudelaire then, modernity is an enunciation of the disappearance of a comfortable or causal relationship with our own past in favour of an insistence on the present, together with a calculation as to how that present might unfold and change into the future. Because Baudelaire is reacting to the fact of the modern, to be modern for him means to recognise the fundamental importance of the rapid transformation and flux in the choreography of everyday life. Modernity is the fact that there is no stable present; the latter is always already transformed by the demands of an ever-approaching future. We can never be sure what the present will mean retrospectively, because we can never really hold onto it for long enough to understand it, or, as in the case with Baudelaire's erotic reveries of the street, long enough to enjoy it. We can only ever attempt to artificially prolong it by trying to represent it. Even more reason, one would assume, why we must anticipate and make proposals for the future.

If the idea of the essay title is paradoxical, its wording is also familiar. We can find something quite close to it, again in Baudelaire: 'In short, for any "modernity" to be worthy of one day taking its place as "antiquity", it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it.'⁶ In 'The Painter of Modern Life' Baudelaire insists that the artist of today cannot learn what is fundamentally original about modern life from looking at past pictures. The draperies of Rubens and Veronese will not help, he says, in the depiction of modern manufactured fabric. Nor will the gestures and bearing of women in these ancient paintings give us clues as to how the modern women of today carry themselves in public life: 'If a painstaking, scrupulous, but feebly imaginative artist has to paint a courtesan of today and takes his "inspiration" (that is the accepted word) from a courtesan by Titian or Raphael, it is only too likely that he will produce a work which is false, ambiguous and obscure.'⁷ Putting aside the obvious objection that an 'artist of today' might be looking at Titian or Raphael not for inspiration, but in order to try and understand important pictorial inventions and problems, we can say that Baudelaire identifies the pre-history of modern works of art in their antiquity, even if, with regards to the question of intelligible influence, he instructs artists to stay away from examples of it. The modern pictures of today will one day reveal an accurate historical modernity not because they imitated or copied a past model, but because they were made by/from an imagination completely distilled and infused with the forms and signs of modern life. To be modern then, for Baudelaire, it is necessary to depict the world in such a way that one day a viewer can have a genuine relationship to a modern present now past. You could argue therefore that in 'The Painter of Modern Life' we have a manifesto for how a future antiquity might appear (to look). In this sense Baudelaire prepares the ground for the sentiment that informs the original

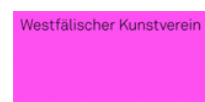


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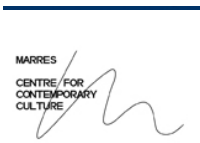


proposition to which my own text is a response.

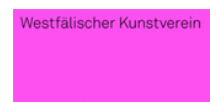
But the passages from Baudelaire quoted above are probably not precise enough to be the exact pre-texts for the proposition 'Is modernity our antiquity?'. What seems consanguineous is a more recent passage from the introduction to T.J. Clark's Farewell to an Idea. Except Clark does not actually cite 'modernity'. Rather he says that modernism is our antiquity.⁸ These two words, modernity (or 'the modern') and modernism, are often used interchangeably, and sometimes when one says the one, one actually means the other. Indeed, by citing Baudelaire I too have contributed to this confusion. Apart from the fact that in 1863 (the year that 'The Painter of Modern Life' was first published) there was not yet a clear distinction between modernity (as the fact of modern life) and modernism (the artistic forms that tried to represent and articulate the experience and effects of that modernity), we can identify in Baudelaire a clear intention to keep what is modern in (modern) art more-or-less contained within classical ideas of art. Baudelaire wanted pictures of modern life (modernity); he did not necessarily want modern pictures of life (modernism). Ultimately, as Sylviane Agacinski demonstrates, Baudelaire refuses to allow what is truly modern about modernity to effect and change the material means of making an art that at one and the same time would be both modern and appropriate for modernity.⁹ Modernism's strength lay in the material and critical contestation of this idea of appropriateness. Not content to simply depict the modern, to make pictures of it, modernism rather responded, as Clark himself has put it, to the very blindness of modernity, to the things that it could not countenance or anticipate or even understand. You could say, as Clark does, that modernism always needed to be in advance of modernity, but more on this in a moment. What I simply want to establish here is that in Baudelaire modern art, because it refuses the full implications of modernity, begins to look decidedly pre-modern. For instance, in an often-quoted passage from 'The Modern Public and Photography', Baudelaire wrote: 'Poetry and Progress are two ambitious men who hate each other with an instinctive hatred.'¹⁰ Put simply, Baudelaire will not recognise what is truly modern for art; he wants an art that is in the end not so different from the antiquity that he instructs artists to close their eyes to. Therefore in Baudelaire's text modernism, before it is named as such, cannot even be anticipated, let alone entertained.

Not only does Clark say modernism is now our antiquity, he insists that it is the only one we have. What does he mean by this? One way of reading it would be to say that modernism's iconoclastic relationship to its own past has been so decisive, so absolute that it has in fact obliterated any possibility of re-visiting anything before it. I know he does not exactly mean that, but I think his parenthetical addition insists on this possibility. If, as Clark argues, modernism is the making bearable of the endlessness of Hegel's end of art ('by always imagining, time and time again, that it has already taken place') and if in turn modernism is now our antiquity, then we may be forced to accept the new premise that the end is no longer endless, but has in fact ended, is in the past.¹¹ Moreover, modernism's self definition as a creative war on past forms (antiquity) suggests that if modernism is our antiquity, there is now a war against that war.

We are now, according to Clark, living through modernity's crowning achievement of pure contingency and absolute secularisation: the disenchantment of the world that Max Weber once described is complete. The experience of modern life today is one of administrative regimentation where industrial and virtual machines produce everything that order and configure our daily lives, and they do this according to an enduring and secularised set of protocols (profit, regimentation, order and globalisation - in short, Capital). And yet amidst this total modernisation, every day we feel more insecure, and every day the risk associated with our modern obligations increases exponentially. The aesthetic ideas and practices that came to be known as modernism initially had some stake, investment and predicative power in how modernity was going to shape up. Modernism tried to make sense of the modern revolution in the world; it produced aesthetic objects, images and ideas in relation to the fact that modernity was deemed not yet to be complete, nor its ideas fully actualised. Modernism was, in other words, the idea that modernity could be figured and interpolated with utopian possibility. If one concludes that this power of predication is now impossible, then the grounds upon which today's artistic ideas and practices stand are littered with the archaeological remnants of modernism. What is shocking is that whereas modernity and modernism were cast as relentlessly forward thinking, we now find 'signs' of the modern in the



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past, in the unfulfilled dreams of what never came but still might. It is precisely this failure (of the modern and of modernism too) that is given a kind of noble profile in its unrealised potential. Modernism, then, is a theory of and a question to the modern, before the modern has conquered all. To say, as Clark does, that modernism is our antiquity and the only one we have is to insist that there is no longer such a theoretical premise or any speculation at the heart of the modern. It's here, it's now and it's triumphant.

At the Foot of the Flatiron

At the Foot of the Flatiron (1903, American Mutoscope and Biograph Co.) is a beautiful film, scarcely two-minutes long and shot, as the title announces, next to New York's first modern steel-frame skyscraper, built by the Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham in 1902. Burnham's building was erected on the triangulated corner of 23rd Street, Broadway and 5th Avenue, considered at the time to be New York's windiest spot. Legend has it that men would regularly wait there to catch a glimpse of women's undergarments as their skirts or dresses billowed upwards in the wind. Shot barely a year after the building first opened to the public, the shooting and screening of *At the Foot of the Flatiron* would have been part of the general curiosity and marvel that surrounded this building and its location. It is not ladies' skirts that are the subject of the film (though the intensity of the featured wind in the film is felt all the more palpably by the occasional sight of a woman's dress being blown dramatically), rather it is the fact that the visibly strong wind threatens to lift off the hats worn by both men and women as they walk past. The camera is static; people walk through and across the frame, gripping their hats to their heads, fighting the wind. Some people walk towards the camera, others walk away from it; still others come very close and virtually obscure the image. Many people look at the camera, some stop for a moment or two as they do.

The film is as beautiful as it is touching. In a very obvious sense it is funny and the then-new technology of moving images seems best equipped to capture 'the event' and transform it by way of its own compositional devices into a spectacle we can enjoy and marvel at. It seems inconceivable that either painting or photography (for instance) could have produced and transformed the event into something so precise and perfect. There is no allegory here. Nor is it a documentary in any straightforward sense. It is a filmic gag that is able to reveal something vitally important about historical transition.

Two elements, or motifs, dominate my interest as I watch the film. The first, the more obvious of the two, is the struggle of passers-by to keep their hats on their heads on that windy day at the foot of the Flatiron building. The second, more or less experienced as a distraction to the first, is that many, if not most of the people in their short passage through the camera's frame, look at the camera, and sometimes more than once. The first is the ostensible subject of the film; the second is about the forming of a new subjectivity in relationship to this 'new' technology of the moving image, right here in the heart of an emerging modern city at what must have been felt at the time to be its most modern site.

First, the hats: why did the people who passed in front of the camera get up that morning of the windy day and decide to wear a hat? The 19th century, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, was obsessed with the idea of covering or containing things. Was the wearing of hats part of this obsessive desire to cover? Or was it simply modesty, whereby the exposure of the top of the head was considered to be improper in some way? In the film, most of the people lovingly struggle to hold their hats to their heads as the wind gusts: rather than protect their hats (and tuck them safely to their sides), they protect their heads. But from what? From the wind? The wind is telling them, rather forcefully in fact, that on this day and in this place they should perhaps consider not wearing hats at all. And what could they possibly imagine would happen to them if their heads were uncovered?

Is it possible to 'recover' the real theory of the hat in New York at the turn of the century? By this I mean the compulsion to wear a hat: why someone might feel that he or she was not complete, contained, precisely ready, unless his or her head was covered. We can, of course think about the fashion of the time, how hats were considered to be essential garments of a comprehensive self-fashioning. But the 'fashion of the time', what is this if not the archaeology of something that we just cannot understand anymore? It defeats our imagination. It defeats our imagination precisely because the hats worn on that very windy day spoke unconsciously to this loose collective of enthusiastic New Yorkers - many probably there to visit the new modern marvel of the Flatiron building -

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and about their relationship to the (modern) world in which they lived; their dress sense, we can assume, was an articulation of their imagined place there. Clark suggests that we can no longer know what it feels like to live in an epoch where modernity is still emerging, still testing its feet, becoming dominant for sure, but not yet triumphant. And don't those hats from the turn of the century make these people look as if they were actually from a time older than the one they are actually 'in'? The hats seem to puncture the *mise en scène* with a strange archaic trace. We know that these people lived in relationship to the forming modernity, but we can have no real sense of what that relationship was. Perhaps the feeling of the properness of these hats, of fashion *per se*, is also the feeling of a certain cuspness, the feeling that one is living in relationship to something, and not simply as subject to it. For some, this is the very cuspness that gave fuel to modernism in its belief(s) that it could imagine, and perhaps even transform, the modern world differently, that it was not just representations and celebrations of extant forms and ideas. What does it mean to be modern? Well for the individuals in this film it meant to wear a hat and to wear it at all costs. But I can't help having the suspicion that this desire to 'hold on to your hat', in this instance, is the articulation of a reaction to the modern; as if by holding on to their hats these New Yorkers try to hang on to 'their' past, something more secure and comforting than the uncertain future the modern proposes.

An extraordinary number of people cross the frame in this film. They make the frame seem perpetually 'full', and flat too. The way the people struggle to keep their hats on complements the feeling of fullness. Arms make chaotic sweeps of movement from left to right, up and down and all the directions in between. There is even the feeling of the wind itself magically and metaphorically shoring up any holes or gaps left by all the other overlapping movements (one of the great, impossible projects of film has been to try and depict the very things it cannot, wind being one of the most obsessive subjects in this respect). *At the Foot of the Flatiron* is a film documenting a phenomenon, keeping that phenomenon alive. But if we think only of the way the frame is used and filled, of all the movement within and the fullness of this accumulation, it seems to me that it can suddenly become a different kind of composition. I instinctively want to call it an 'all-over' composition, but recognise immediately that this perception runs the risk of flattening out the film and robbing it of the history it putatively represents. And perhaps my observation here seems to come strikingly close to Clark's doleful lament for what happens to modernism today: that it is reduced and recalled as small compensatory examples of re-enchantment.

I would argue that far from reduction, what I have described is an example of the unique and creative transformation that moving-image technology accomplishes. We may believe that with film and video we can recall a past moment and have it stand in for a 'real' collective memory, whereas all the while the material is creating a remarkable new composition, one that has never been seen before. Take, for example, all those looks at camera in the Flatiron film: here I think we see something emerging that is completely original.

There are, of course, two self-conscious ways of being in front of the camera. You can look at the camera, acknowledge it (as most do in this film), or, if you prefer, pretend it is not there. At the very beginning of film, the first option is not yet codified as 'looking to camera' (the kind of looking that typically 'spoils' a shot and forces a re-take), and the second is not really an option at all (if you have no sense of spoiling the event, why would you not look?) Today, for most films, the feeling of the neutrality of the camera and its invisibility is guaranteed by the lack of looks at the camera. And even in documentaries where subjects often look to camera in order to speak directly to an audience, they very rarely subject the apparatus itself to a quizzical gaze.

But in 1903 all these ideas were still a million miles away. What could have been more natural than to look at a machine (including its operators) and its event, presenting themselves together as the production of a modern novelty? This is so very different from today, when we spot a camera crew working in the street and immediately recognise that 'a movie is being made'; we might look around to see if we can spot a famous actor or two, or try to parse what the subject of the film is. Perhaps. But would we not also be flattered by the fact that the space we are currently occupying, a space we know or live in or are just passing through, is in one sense the subject of a film (we might even use this fact later as an entrée to some dinner conversation)? Back then, in 1903, this look at the camera must have been a genuine act of curiosity. Can these people walking in and out

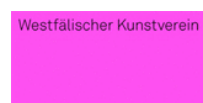


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of frame really imagine themselves as the subjects of a film? Would they know, like us, how to adjust their gait, their manner and their expression? Surely not. We, on the other hand know too much about film: we know how to 'behave', how to hold ourselves, how to look and what poses to strike. Today, as is well known, our lives are already films.

So many of the early films - films by the Lumières, or the Mutascope and Edison companies - have this strange new phenomenon of the look at camera. In *At the Foot of the Flatiron*, the passers-by juggle their concern for their hats with their curiosity for the camera. As soon as I write this I realise that it is probably not the phenomenon of wearing hats that is the most revealing thing in this film with regards to a relationship between modern time and what has now gone forever. Rather, it was and continues to be, as I watch the film over and over again, the juggling of an invisible protocol ('you must wear a hat at all costs, even if this makes you look foolish') and something that is wholly new. Indeed the most startling moment in the film is when one man is so distracted by the camera that he loses his hat: he gives in to the look at camera and, for a moment anyway, the past is lost. This then is what is totally inscrutable: trying to imagine what it felt to be the subject of a film camera at the foot of the Flatiron building on a windy day in 1903. It's a modern unknown. It speaks to the different possibility whereby the future, the future that we live in now, might understand differently the experience of what it is to be the subject of a truly modern image - a subtle and in the end baffling idea of how we might remember what it means to become modern.

In *At the Foot of the Flatiron*, as with other early films, we are witnessing that particular look (the look at camera) as it begins its inevitable arc of disappearance. Soon it will transform itself into something more self-conscious, more sophisticated. It will become a look no longer at camera, but to camera. It will incorporate a knowledge born of comparison and anticipation ('how will this film of me match and compare to the ideal image of myself, in relationship to all similar images of me and others?'). In short, what we witness in this early film is the subject's self-consciousness before, or actually at the very moment, that that self-consciousness is imbued and invested, via this modern moving-image regime, with a new sense of history. I find this feeling remarkable; because it is truly and radically unknowable, it seems to suggest that it has also failed to become a past object. Failure in this sense is to give that look a real possibility, a second chance that is always never the last. In this sense, I want to argue that far from being part of an antiquity that belongs to us, what we 'find' in the past (in this case the strange look at camera, or more properly the impossible juggling between this look and the desire to hang on to your hat, that is to say, to hang on to history) can sometimes be the unfulfilled dreams of what never came up to be but maybe still might, only differently.

Hampstead Heath, Summer 2006

London this summer has been unusually hot and this has affected the look of the city in quite dramatic ways. The parks in particular look very different: with scorched yellow grass and trees wilting from lack of moisture (there also has been a hosepipe ban), they look reminiscent of a southern California landscape. While grass and trees have 'suffered', other forms of life have thrived, and some of the ponds on Hampstead heath (the large 'wild' park in the north of London) have grown dense with fluorescent green algae. One pond in particular is quite opaque; no longer a pond, it's now a gorgeous expanse of dazzling green and when the sun comes out and the wind blows, trees cast large mobile shadows that change shape hypnotically across its surface. Ducks and other waterbirds seem to hover strangely as they move across the pond, creating almost no wake at all. It's an unworldly site, an impossibly green oasis and all the more uncanny for being in a city park. In the middle of writing this text about how a small modernist Vancouver apartment building and an early film from turn-of-the-century New York might be relevant for a discussion about modernity and modernism, I have broken away from my desk, quite regularly in fact, and visited this location. Each day I have joined the continuous flow of people who stop with puzzlement to marvel at this strangely beautiful scene.

Beyond the obvious that I have just tried to describe, I am not sure what has drawn me to this place. The pictorial genre of landscape contains within it a very complex history of modern picture making. From the early modern painting of van Eyck, Botticelli, da Vinci and others, where the emerging landscapes in the background began to point to the freedom and autonomy of representation (art's desire to leave behind the strictures and dogma of commission), through

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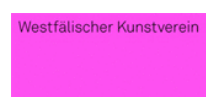
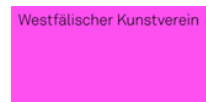
to early modernism's most audacious adventures in rethinking picture making (Manet, Cézanne, Courbet and others), the landscape has in some respects been the genre where art has simultaneously tried to come to terms with and advance change. Without this long history of experimentation, it might have seemed strange that at the height of the modern revolution, artists of the 19th century returned over and over again to think about how to depict those places that seemed virtually untouched by modernity. In other words, we could argue that 'nature', which in the language of modernity has been granted a wholly separate sphere from that of the history of man, has been something of a holy grail for modern picture making. And moreover, by giving the landscape genre such care and attention, painting in particular has produced a hybrid modern form far more modern than any of modernity's apologists could ever have conceived.

Giving Up the Past

Central to the idea of a relation to antiquity is the sentiment that things were decidedly better before. This seems to be a universal sentiment, across time and across place, and such appeal to the ancients justifies disillusionment with the contemporary. You could argue that the very idea of the modern, that is to say, all the aesthetic, political and philosophical debate as to its status, value and disposition, has been staged around the question of the value or relevance of the past. As our modernity evolves, so too does our relationship to our immediate past, and our antiquity is transformed and re-invented. In the political sphere, modern religious ideologies that have at their heart some previous perfect form of organization play out what is in fact only a simulacrum of the pre-modern (antiquity). While they are clearly unable to replicate an earlier period, what they can do is imagine that past, and make a wholly modern fiction of it. They act the pre-modern like a huge D.W. Griffiths set, only this time more than a few get hurt. They cannot make the past come back, yet they are stuck in the hopeless and meaningless attempt of trying to do exactly that. Paradoxically, rather than becoming the ancients that they worship and idolise, they seem to have learnt an awful lot from the moderns. In other words, what they are engaged in is a very modern idea and this is what makes it so terrifying. The archaeology of the past, identifying an antiquity (to either repeat or be repelled by) - this is a thoroughly modern sensibility. Modern too, as Bernard Yack has detailed, is the idea that emerges in the late-18th and early-19th centuries that to undergo revolutionary change it is not enough to overthrow (or modernize) the system of political power; one must also remodel and change humanity itself.¹² It's as if ordinary (modern) man was not yet good enough, not deserving enough for revolution, as if it would be wasted on its subjects and that they therefore needed to be violently re-modelled. From this tragic and very modern formulation has flown the real blood of millions of innocent victims.

In very obvious ways the past has always been unknown to us, probably more so than any imagined future. This is the unspoken truth of Baudelaire's hunting down of the modern present: as he struggles to give 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent', some sort of palpable eternal form, the present immediately becomes past, it slips irrevocably through his fingers - the lines and rhyming of his poetry the only means available to him (and to his reader) to slow things down in the vain hope that this present (now past) can mean something.¹³ In some respects, it seems perverse that the very pursuit of and attachment to the past should give rise to an attack on it. Modernity's antagonism to antiquity can also be held up as the mirror image of the belief that the modern has somehow degenerated or betrayed the achievements of the ancients. In other words, the very coupling of modernity with the idea of antiquity ('is modernity our antiquity?') underlines the very complicated co-dependent and simultaneously antagonistic relationship between the two. To cast modernity as our antiquity is to suggest that (despite the confusion and conflation of terms discussed earlier) what we are living through now is flawed and diminished by the failure of modernism's great ideas to be even legible now, let alone actualized. As such the set theme of this essay could be said to be continuing the long tradition of always looking behind us, to the past as the place where we may best understand our ideas and ourselves. Although this archaeology is undoubtedly important, we might wonder if it risks repeating the blindness of Baudelaire, leaving us unprepared for unexpected developments, not only in the present, but also in the future.

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- Mark Lewis

Footnotes

1. G.W.F Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Malcolm Knox (trans.), Oxford: PUB, 1975; quoted in T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p.371.↑
2. Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Jonathon Mayne (trans. and ed.), New York: Da Capo Press, 1986, p.13.↑
3. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Catherine Porter (trans.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.↑
4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Athlone Press, 1997, p.1.↑
5. C. Baudelaire, op. cit., p.1.↑
6. Ibid., p.13.↑
7. Ibid., p.14.↑
8. See T.J. Clark, op. cit., 1999.↑
9. See Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, Jody Gladding (trans.), New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.↑
10. Charles Baudelaire, 'The Modern Public and Photography', in Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982.↑
11. T.J. Clark, op. cit., 1999, p.373.↑
12. See Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.↑
13. C. Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', op. cit., p.13.↑



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