

# Modernism Unbound, Part 1: Formal and Sociocultural Development

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## 1. A Copernican Revolution in the Arts

The underlying premise of this essay is that of a cognitive congruence between the natural sciences and modernist art. Just like the natural sciences continuously have redrawn our understanding of reality and our existence in it, so did modernist art initiate a similar ‘Copernican revolution’ within the realms of aesthetics at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – which articulated itself in terms of a maelstrom of formal subversions that constitute some of the major aesthetic achievements of the past century. More specifically, this cognitive congruence is rooted in the mutual overturning of the pre-modern equivalence between experience and reality. It has often been argued that the emergence of modern science during the scientific revolution was initiated by Nicolaus Copernicus’ heliocentric model of the solar system. However, contrary to common opinion, its main epistemological impact was not the removal of man from the centre of the universe, but rather the decisive undermining of the pre-modern idea that first-person phenomenological experience constitutes the absolute source of human knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This marked a crucial turning-point in a still ongoing ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Max Weber), through which we gradually have come to realise that the world accessible by immediate human experience is just a small fragment of a reality whose unbound vastness stretches far beyond our default cognitive comprehension. Scientific discoveries such as black holes, galactic expansion, neural networks and quantum mechanics are just a few examples of macro and micro natural phenomena that are fundamentally incompatible with our common sense understanding of things precisely insofar as they present images of reality that are completely at odds with those that we have come to accept as true. Indeed, the more we find out about reality through science, the more we also realise how much we in fact *do not* understand about the dizzying complexity of the universe. Herein lies the impersonal trauma that the natural sciences effectuate within the confines of the experiential subject – yet rather than recoiling in horror from it, it should be embraced as a set of *constructively perplexing* impersonal instruments for navigating the alien vastness of the natural and cosmic outside – or, in the words of the philosopher Ray Brassier, as a genuinely ‘speculative opportunity’.

If the revolution in modern science has any aesthetic equivalent, it is surely that of modernism – whose critique of the realist reproduction of the immediately experienced world, and concomitant expansion of the horizon of formal possibilities (in painting, music, literature, cinema, etc.), indeed effectuated a similar overturning of the phenomenological subject by severing the congruence between experience and reality. Rather than aiming to reproduce the confines of reality as accessible by immediate experience, modernist art sought to navigate the vast (internal and external) dimensions located outside of our undeniably quite modest phenomenological interfacing with reality. Thus began a concomitant ‘dethroning of man’ in the various modernist arts – although not of man as such, but rather of a particular static understanding of man that clearly needs to be abandoned in light of the alien dimensions unveiled by the modern arts and sciences. Indeed, rather than being anchored within the closed framework of the phenomenological subject, what the unveiling of these impersonal dimensions points to is the underlying ‘plasticity of reality’ (Mark Fisher) and of man as such – that is, the basic malleability of everything once emancipated from the restrictions imposed by a transcendental guarantor (e.g. human experience or God).<sup>2</sup> It is the unfolding of these impersonal, plastic dimensions that sits at the heart of the modernist revolution in the arts, and which was realised in a plethora of art forms and movements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Contrary to common understanding, modernism should thus not be understood simply as synonymous with particular aesthetic forms (e.g. cubism or serialism), or as a particular era in cultural history, but rather as an *abstract ‘vector of revision and construction’* (Reza Negarestani) that articulates itself in (although cannot be reduced to) specific aesthetic forms and augments our understanding of reality and what it means to be human by recognising that neither ‘reality’ nor ‘human’ are fixed terms to be settled once and for all – but on the contrary constantly have to be renegotiated in light of new scientific and other intellectual advancements.<sup>3</sup> Its basic cognitive import is thus how it forces us to reassess seemingly given realities in favour of different ones by repeatedly augmenting the human lifeworld that we have constructed, and often have come to take for granted, through various confrontations with its outside. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari make a similar observation when they argue that what is characteristic of modern art is a preoccupation with nonvisible forces to be rendered visible – as opposed to mere reproductions of the visible – which also marks the moment when Western art enters the technological age and (in a genuinely Copernican spirit) orients itself beyond the earth towards the cosmic realm.<sup>4</sup> At its

most basic, this is a process of *alienation* – yet a very different one compared to the socio-political alienation of everyday life that usually is referred to when the concept of alienation is invoked. For whereas that is a form of alienation rooted in structural oppressions imposed by restrictions of existing society (e.g. Marx's alienation of labour) – and hence in an inability to live one's life to the fullest – the kind of alienation at work in modernist art instead marks a gain in cognitive (self-) understanding insofar as it provides us with an augmented perspective both on reality and on ourselves. We thus need to distinguish between two forms of alienation here – between an *experience of alienation* and an *alienation from experience*, which alludes to the alienation that comes with stepping outside of familiar phenomenological territories and into fundamentally alien dimensions that lie beyond basic human experience. Yet this latter form of alienation should not be understood simply in negative terms – as something to shy away from (this is obviously why modernist art often is perceived as 'weird' or 'difficult', but progress is often difficult) – but must rather be understood as an enabling condition for human exploration and creativity.

From this perspective, modernist art is thus significant insofar as it utilises aesthetics as a medium for *cognitively distancing* the phenomenological subject from itself and its lifeworld under the aegis of a plethora of *formal* experiments. For if modernism has come to be known as a formal revolution in the arts, it is precisely insofar as the shift from aesthetic content to form marks the moment when art moves from simply indexing the content of immediate experience to venturing beyond its phenomenal grasp. However, the theorisation of the cultural significance of formalism by high modernist thinkers such as Clement Greenberg has rightly been criticised on the basis of its problematic association with the elitism of high modernism as *l'art pour l'art*. For instance, in his by now classical essay 'Modernist Painting' (1961), Greenberg argues that the only way for art to maintain its integrity from the deplorable entertainment of kitsch is to construct irreducible aesthetic experiences that are unique both to art in general and to every artistic medium as such. For Greenberg, modernism thus came to embody a search for aesthetic purity by isolating the formal properties unique to each medium and in that way safeguard the autonomy of art from surrounding cultural and socio-political pressures. Needless to say, this kind of reasoning is seriously flawed from the perspective of the position advanced here, since there are other dimensions of formalism that need to be distinguished from that of Greenberg's and that risk being overlooked if formalism is thought of merely as synonymous with the elitism (or 'aestheticism') of high modernism. Crucial here is

an understanding of formalism in terms of the terminology introduced just now: that is, as a confrontation with an outside alien to the modest fragment of reality indexed by human phenomenological experience. A useful starting point here is what Greenberg considers another key feature of high modernist formalism: its commitment to self-criticism, which took the form of various augmentations of the formal possibilities of art (e.g. through experiments with colour and surface in painting.). Contrasting modernist with realist painting – which instead sought to conceal the formal properties of its medium – Greenberg thus argues that modernist art was driven by the ambition to make these properties explicit:

The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment – were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Greenberg ultimately sees these experiments as nothing but instruments for confirming the distinct competence of art and in that way guarantee its autonomy. Thus, rather than putting them on the side of aesthetic subversion – in terms of the production of spatiotemporal ruptures by breaking away from past conventions (opinions that he instead attributes to art journalists suffering from a ‘millennial complex’) – he rather views them as firmly entrenched in the ‘taste and tradition’ of ‘past standards of excellence’.<sup>6</sup> But in this way, he ends up defanging the alien underpinnings of formal experimentation by reducing it to a dubious aesthetic experience available only to a select few. Contrary to Greenberg, the argument here is that modernist formalism indeed is both aesthetically and cognitively subversive – which his aestheticism skates over by reducing the cognitive dissonance of formal experimentation to a kind of autonomous aesthetic phenomenology.

So how do we rethink the cultural potentials of formal experimentation beyond the aestheticism of high modernist theory? For me, it is through the concept of what I call *formal alienation* – which also must not be conflated with a specific aesthetic style, but should rather be understood as a ‘generic tendency’ (Carl Freedman) or an *abstract aesthetic model* that, to various degrees, underlies all forms of modernist art. At its most basic, formal alienation refers to the cognitively subversive potentials of aesthetic forms in terms of how they may be utilised to

introduce alien perspectives that clash with our most central phenomenological preconceptions about reality. Formal alienation is thus a medium for navigating this alien vastness through aesthetic experiments that – while embedded in human culture as such – nevertheless are not confined within the boundaries of the human lifeworld as we know it, but instead constantly seek to navigate outside of it by exploring that which lies beyond its narrow realm. Its underlying premise is the fact that the limits that define human experience are not naturally given, but on the contrary constantly are renegotiated in light of novel advancements in fields such as science, technology and aesthetics. Formal alienation thus corresponds to the notion of the aesthetic ‘fragmentation of reality’ (Peter Bürger), which expresses itself through the use of montage – here not to be understood in the cinematic sense of simply linking images together, but in the experimental sense of undermining the unity of organic representation (or experience) – in the form of so-called *non-organic artworks*. Whereas organic artworks are organised around an underlying congruence between parts and whole – where each part only can be understood in terms of its unity with the other parts within the whole, and the whole only through the unity of the compositions of its parts – in the non-organic work of art, the parts have been emancipated from simply maintaining the coherence of the whole. In this way, not only is the internal coherence of the artwork as such overturned – but so is a cognitive presupposition organised around the faithful representation of a static reality fully accessible to immediate experience. Contrary to this, the non-organic artwork explicates the *sub-experiential process of construction* of reality. And rather than trying to effectuate a cognitive reconciliation between experience and reality, it utilises formal alienation as a medium of cognitive dissonance – which, when at its best, gives rise to the shock effect often associated with modernist formal experimentation (however, this does not mean that a certain whole is not important also in modernist art – it certainly is – but rather that this whole is organised around the contradiction as opposed to the unity of its constituent parts).<sup>7</sup>

Formal alienation is thus primarily a cognitive rather than an affective concept, since its subversive capacity is first and foremost not to be located in the production of various forms of affective experiences – but in the overturning of experience as such. This does however not mean that affect is completely absent from formal alienation – needless to say, the overturning of experience is often an affectively intense experience in itself – but rather that its aesthetic potential must be traced back to cognitive short-circuiting as opposed to affective intensity. This cognitive short-circuiting takes the form of a *reframing* of human experience through en-

agements with reality beyond its immediate empirical realm, which detaches us from the immediacy of first-person phenomenology and our immersion in the here and now. It is a process through which the *alien outside* is folded into (or unfolded out of) the *human inside*, with the artwork itself acting as the medium that realises this process at the hands of the artist. Indeed, the fact that truly formally innovative artworks turn our experience of reality upside-down because of how their compositional structures introduce alien realities sits at the heart of the concept of formal alienation.

Alienation (in its wider speculative sense) should therefore not be opposed to cognitive transformation – but must rather be seen as its precondition – which is why modernist art often may seem both unpleasant and disturbing at first. But the fact that the phenomenological short-circuit – and concomitant expansion of cognitive understanding – that comes out of formal alienation is difficult in its very nature is no reason to shy away from its transformative potentials; quite the opposite, which ultimately provides the underpinnings for an understanding of modernism as a *culture of the outside* fuelled by the ambition to propel culture beyond the paltry confines of immediate phenomenological interests. And the greatest modernist artists are indeed agents of the outside, continually invested in abducting the human species from its ingrained phenomenological narcissism by augmenting culture beyond its seemingly given human restrictions.

## **2. The Dialectic of Development**

The concept of formal alienation has allowed us to take a few much-needed steps away from canonical high modernist theory, but others are still needed. Hence, at the heart of this section is the problematic *sociocultural* account of technology and media culture in the writings of high modernist thinkers – which, as is well known, simply is discarded as ‘culture industry’ (Adorno and Horkheimer) and ‘kitsch’ (Greenberg). Adorno and Horkheimer’s work on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) constitutes the central object of interrogation here, insofar as I believe that its critical reversal from ‘domination’ to ‘speculation’ is crucial for the account of modernist culture outlined in this essay. More specifically, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical diagnosis of media culture as culture industry famously argues that the standardisation effectuated by the latter under industrial capitalism – much like capitalism itself – must be understood as a social symptom of the cognitive pathology that underpins scientific rationality as such (i.e. so-called ‘instrumental rationality’). This is their well-known understanding

of scientific explanation as an unreflective pathology in which man's desire to convert the entirety of nature into series of numbers and formulae (i.e. to control nature via scientific explanation) remains deadlocked within the mythical pattern of sacrifice it wants to be rid of, since what the scientific impetus to exteriorise and spatialise ultimately ends up with, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is nothing but an aggravated form of self-sacrifice, since the reduction of everything to identical units – rather than reaching out towards an exteriority beyond man – merely continues to symbolically sacrifice parts of the human in a pathological, compulsive manner. Hence, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the fundamental link between the natural sciences and media culture manifests itself in terms of the augmentation of instrumental rationality's compulsion to manipulate and control to the innermost layers of the human psyche – which homogenises aesthetic heterogeneity by turning culture into yet another instrument of social domination, and which modernist art (or so-called 'authentic culture') antagonistically opposes through its critical positioning beyond the pseudo-individualising realm of the culture industry. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer's critical analysis of the pathological link between natural science and media culture is rooted in a problematic account of the cognitive disjunction between experience and nature simply as a struggle between dominating and dominated that for them only can be overcome through the integration of nature within the purposefulness of human history – construed as a temporal transcendence of science's pathological compulsion.

But the fact that the thought of science goes beyond our default apprehension of nature should not simply be staved off as a cognitive pathology to be remedied by the properly reflective thinking of philosophy. Rather, the understanding of the natural sciences as a cognitive overturning of the human life-world – where thinking is confronted with an alien outside unconditioned by phenomenological manifestation – should be utilised as the starting-point for aesthetic experimentation. Hence, whereas the critical program advocated by Adorno and Horkheimer ultimately comes down to a form of culture that acts as a mediator of human significance through the integration of nature into the nexus of social remembrance and history (a so-called 'second nature'), I want to insist on the discrepancy between our intuitive image of reality and its naturalistic counterpart unveiled by the natural sciences. And that rather than viewing this discrepancy as threatening to our human self-understanding, as Adorno and Horkheimer do, it should be utilised as the critical foundation for formal, aesthetic experimentation that invites us to gaze into the impersonal vastness of the alien outside.

Yet there are also larger cultural issues at stake in this impersonal overturning of Adorno and Horkheimer's diagnosis of the pathological link between science and culture. In particular, even though *Dialectic of Enlightenment* obviously outlines a major critique of Enlightenment-rationality, it is also a similarly critical diagnosis of the failure of modernity to fulfil the emancipatory promises of the Enlightenment-project. However, if we reject Adorno and Horkheimer's understanding of scientific rationality on the basis of the account outlined on these pages, then we clearly also need a different analysis of modernity that goes with it – one that does not deny the many struggles and oppressions concomitant with modernity, but at the same time also recognises its emancipatory potentials. It seems to me that the philosopher Marshall Berman's compelling account of modernity in his book *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) provides us with just that framework. Here, Berman defines modernity as a radical transformation of the world that gave rise to both thrill and terror as life as we previously knew it began disintegrating. Berman, of course, traces the roots of this transformation to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the 'maelstrom of modern life' that emerged following the many inventions and discoveries in the natural sciences, industrial production, mass communication, architecture, urban planning, psychoanalysis, and so on. For Berman, modernity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century expanded into what he refers to as a 'world culture' that encompasses virtually the entire planet. To this day, it forms a unity that cuts across national, ethnic, religious, ideological, class and gender boundaries; but it is a 'paradoxical unit', as he puts it – a 'unity of disunity', filled with contradictions and ambiguities that need to be overcome.<sup>8</sup> In that regard, to be modern means to face its novel power structures and injustices – from corporate domination and social upheaval to political sovereignty and racial and gender oppression – not with a 'neofeudal regression', but with a set of critical tools that truly grasps the hidden potentialities of modern life. Thus, according to Berman, writing about modernity and modernism should not be reduced to historicism or cultural nostalgia, but should rather be conceived of as an attempt to revive the modernist project and invent novel modernisms of tomorrow. As he puts it, appropriating the modernisms of yesterday may provide us with resources for critiquing the (post-) modernisms of the present and invent novel modernisms for the future: 'It may turn out, then, that going back can be a way to go forward: remembering the modernisms of the nineteenth century can give us the vision and courage to create the modernisms of the twenty-first'.<sup>9</sup>

For Berman, it is Marx, more than any other thinker, who captures the many tensions and ambiguities of the modern era. The title *All That is Solid Melts into Air* is obviously borrowed



from *The Communist Manifesto*, and it is this phrase – with its cosmic, visionary and transformative underpinnings – that best indexes what for Berman sits at the heart of the cognitive vertigo and experiential dizziness concomitant with the maelstrom of modernity. According to Berman, this is what constitutes the core of Marx's analysis of capitalism – which most powerfully explicates the many potentialities and entrapments brought about by modern life. In particular, Berman points out that what was crucial for Marx was that modern bourgeoisie industry had set in renewed motion the human capacity for development and innovation – which manifested itself in a constant desire for change and renewal in economic and social life. Indeed, for the bourgeoisie, to reject progress and growth meant to get stuck in the dread of social stability and the fixed relationships of the past. Contrary to this, man had to orient himself towards the prospect of an open-ended future through a constant demand for self-development. As Berman puts it, the bourgeoisie was the first ruling class in history whose authority did not derive from that of their ancestors, but from their own achievements – which radically transformed the world as we previously knew it. In that regard, the global processes set in motion by the bourgeoisie were in many ways truly astonishing. Yet the problem is of course that the bourgeoisie ultimately failed to deliver on the promises of progression and renewal that they advocated insofar as their agenda remained deadlocked to the narrow obsession with the accumulation of capital. In that regard, they were unable to realise the truly revolutionary potentials of the processes that they had set in motion. For Marx, it was consequently the central task of the proletariat to seize the means of production and complete the Promethean project initiated by the bourgeoisie – for it is only then that the humanist notion of *self-development* will be emancipated from the narrow bourgeoisie model of *economic development*. In that regard, Marx was in fact more attentive to the processes at work in bourgeois society than the bourgeoisie were themselves, as Berman points out, since he identified in them a model for a modern vision of communism organised around the emancipation of the ideal of 'open-ended, unbounded growth' initially proposed by the bourgeoisie. Hence, Marx did not shy away from the processes set in motion by capital through pastoral regression, but instead set out 'to heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller and deeper modernity'.<sup>10</sup>

Needless to say, this Marxist Prometheanism was thoroughly criticised by the Frankfurt School and other philosophers and critical theorists, who argued that Marx merely ended up fetishising central elements of capitalism – such as labour and production – and thereby suffered from a failure of imagination that culminated in the deplorable objective to achieve ra-

tional mastery over nature, as opposed to live in harmony with it. Adorno's remark (which he never put in print) that Marx wants to turn the entire planet into a gigantic workhouse is exemplary of this anti-Promethean stance.<sup>11</sup> But, as Berman points out, the idea of a pre-established oneness between man and nature is itself a fiction that in fact would require an immense Promethean effort to produce. And furthermore, what Marx ultimately is advocating is not work but *development*; and it is only the latter that will be sufficient for realising his Promethean visions, since work is merely a degraded form of development.<sup>12</sup> In that regard, we can say that while capitalism has initiated novel forms of development, it fails to utilise them to their full potential precisely insofar as they remain deadlocked to the dreary agenda of work under the aegis of the accumulation of capital. Yet once development is emancipated from work and capitalist production, it may go on to realise its truly emancipatory dimensions.

It is consequently what he refers to as 'the desire for *development*' that is central to Berman's understanding of modernity, as Perry Anderson also points out in his critical analysis of the book.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, for Berman, modernity should first and foremost be analysed in terms of a struggle over the Promethean potentials implicit in the concept of development understood dialectically in terms of both *self-development* (i.e. the augmentation of human capacities) and *social development* (i.e. the transformation not just of society, but of the entire physical world) – which, when taken together, forms an overall axis of *unbound human development*. Development, for Berman, is therefore fundamentally open-ended insofar as it is not confined within a pre-determined axiom or blueprint – and modernity is simply the sociocultural and political landscape that sets these individual and collective processes in motion. While Berman's Promethean understanding of development is based on a wide variety of resources from politics, literature, architecture and economy, it may also be understood along the trajectories outlined in this essay. More specifically, I believe that self-development may be recoded in terms of formal development, and social development in terms of the development of the sociocultural ecologies in which these formal experiments are embedded.

Crucial here are the Promethean potentials of media technology, which indeed also must be recoded along the lines of development in light of Berman's understanding of modernity. Thus, rather than merely operating as an instrument of homogenisation and pseudo-individualisation under the aegis of instrumental rationality, the emergence of modern media technology marks a major aesthetic and sociocultural bifurcation point through which the possibility spaces of formal and sociocultural development increase dramatically. From a formal

perspective, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the synthesiser is exemplary of this critical moment – yet only when not conceived of as a ‘machine for reproducing sounds’, but as a proper *sound machine* for the production of novel sounds (i.e. for the exploration of novel formal possibilities) at the hands of modernist composers such as Varesé (another sonic example is of course Brian Eno’s understanding of the studio as a compositional tool):

By assembling modules, source elements, and elements for treating sound (oscillators, generators, and transformers), by arranging microintervals, the synthesizer makes audible the sound process itself, the production of that process, and puts us in contact with still other elements beyond sound matter.<sup>14</sup>

But even more useful here is the work of a fellow traveller of the Frankfurt School – Walter Benjamin – whose essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936) famously offers a more optimistic take on the aesthetic and sociocultural potentials of modern media technology (as is well-known, Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written as a critical response to Benjamin’s essay on art and mechanical reproduction). Indeed, I think that his thesis on how mechanical reproduction emancipates art from aesthetic contemplation, aura and authenticity by opening it up to broader socio-political concerns and widening our cognitive interfacing with reality crucially converges with Berman’s dialectic of self- and collective development in terms of its account of the expanded aesthetic and sociocultural parameters congruent with technologies of reproduction. As the cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen points out in his discussion of Benjamin’s work: Benjamin’s starting-point is that capitalism creates the conditions for its own future dissolution, and consequently that revolutionary aesthetic tendencies must be located within the production relations of capitalism itself – for instance, in mechanical reproduction.<sup>15</sup> He thus strongly opposes all notions of withdrawn, aesthetic contemplation (i.e. aestheticism) in favour of speculations on the novel cognitive and sociocultural potentials of technologies essentially geared towards collective as opposed to individual experience (what he argues marks the shift from ritual to politics). Furthermore, rather than observing reality from a contemplative distance, new media technology compels artists to – like a surgeon – dissect reality by infusing it with artifice and in that way expand our phenomenological experience of it. In one passage, Benjamin thus compares this reality-expanding function of new media (cinema more specifi-

cally, but it obviously applies to other media forms as well) to how psychoanalysis has augmented our understanding of ourselves through the discovery of the unconscious. Indeed, this alien dethroning of man effectuated by psychoanalysis finds an aesthetic equivalence in the technologies of mechanical reproduction, whose reality-dissecting parameters are rooted in an entwinement of art and science that, for Benjamin, will constitute one of its future revolutionary functions. Hence, I think that one of the central aesthetic and sociocultural implications of Benjamin's and Berman's work is the fact that the potential for large-scale cognitive and social transformation is coded into the very DNA of modern media technology – and thus that to not aim to maximise this potential is to suppress its most crucial aesthetic and sociocultural function. At the same time, it is of course impossible today to not read Benjamin's essay under the shadow of how mechanical reproduction was utilised for mass propaganda and oppression throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and still is at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> (although is this not just a depraved example of this potential?) – and of how much subsequent critical theory have expressed a mourning for aura and authenticity, rather than elaborated on the implications of his more speculative views. But this is precisely why it is important to take a different look at his theses – for instance through the lens of Berman's visionary account of modernity – as opposed to yet again filtering them through the by now familiar conceptual trajectories of 'culture industry' and 'social domination'. Indeed, one can only imagine what critical theory might have looked like today if Berman's understanding of modernity had come to set the academic agenda rather than Adorno and Horkheimer's.

### **3. The Re-Engineering of Culture**

From the perspective of this essay, Berman's dialectic of self- and collective development should consequently be understood in terms of unbound experimentation with and distribution of aesthetics of formal alienation under the aegis of increased socio-technological investment (i.e. modernism unbound). And a large-scale media culture steeped in technology should be taken as a locus of such formal and sociocultural experimentation, rather than as its antagonist (i.e. as culture industry). Crucial here is the overcoming of the distinction between high and low culture that was central to high modernist thinking, and persists to this day in terms of a similar distinction between underground and popular. Because from the perspective of open-ended development advocated in this essay, the dichotomy between high and low, or underground and popular, must be rejected simply insofar as it constitutes an uncomfortable re-

striction on the emancipatory potentials of development in its aesthetic and sociocultural forms. For if these potentials are to be fully realised, the dialectic of development cannot remain a *contained subversion* within the small-scale (or local) networks of high/underground culture, but must be unfolded through the large-scale (global) infrastructures managed by the culture industry. Herein lies another Promethean premise of this essay, insofar as rather than taking 'The Great Divide' (Andreas Huyssen) between modernist and popular culture as a 'natural given' – which, at its worst, articulates itself through a desire to operate exclusively in the underground, wholly isolated from the rest of culture, as a sign of artistic maturity and integrity – it seeks to take on and remake the landscape of popular media culture according to more exploratory and emancipatory ends by levelling the difference between the modernist and the popular. Therefore, against the one-dimensional reality of the late capitalist culture industry – where media culture merely is utilised for the fulfilling of artificial needs imposed by capitalism itself – what is advocated here is the construction of a different culture – and, by extension, a different, multidimensional reality – that will flourish in all kinds of media formats through the large-scale emancipation of formal and sociocultural development.

In a 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno wrote that both high art and the culture industry are torn halves of an integral freedom that, nevertheless, does not add up. Needless to say, Adorno's work did little to try to piece these torn halves together, but instead observed how the culture industry began to realise its own version of this process by integrating and accommodating existing modernist forms into its shallow agenda. Yet by doing so, formal and sociocultural development were cut short in the way analysed by Berman, insofar as the large-scale distribution of modernist formal alienations by late capitalism simply ended in their defanging under the aegis of generic commodification and sociocultural standardisation – as opposed to in a culture ushering in their open-ended development. Indeed, one way to understand the successive implementation of late capitalist hegemony over the past decades is in terms of the gradual accommodation and elimination of the subversive outsides indexed by previous formal alienations and sociocultural experimentations. And what is characteristic of late capitalist culture is thus a culture industry that steadily has absorbed all forms of previous outsides according to the dictum that late capitalist reality is the only form of reality available, and something that demands *passive accommodation* as opposed to *active remaking* (i.e. Fredric Jameson's 'postmodernism' and Mark Fisher's 'capitalist realism'). For whereas 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist cultures operated in terms of various kinds of confrontations with the outside, postmodern

culture is a form of culture where these outsides no longer are available and where culture has been transformed into a distinctively *human* culture (i.e. a culture of the inside) under the aegis of late capitalism. Hence the widespread emergence of ‘formal nostalgia’ (Fisher) – that is, the unacknowledged recycling of previous cultural forms in a digital, hi-tech environment – in culture over the past decades;<sup>16</sup> since when virtually all forms of outsides have been eliminated from the cultural imagination, culture can only keep reproducing itself rather than reach out towards an exteriority beyond.<sup>17</sup> This is how late capitalism realised the overcoming of the schism between high and low culture that fuelled the cultural imagination of key 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural movements such as the historical avant-garde and the post-war popular modernists – that is, through a universal lowering rather than raising of cultural expectations, in the form of an increasingly ubiquitous culture industry where the high modernist ideal of ‘critical distance’ no longer seems to be possible.<sup>18</sup> Yet just because late capitalism has rendered the subversive potential of past modernist outsides more or less obsolete, this does not mean that other such outsides are not available. It just means that these outsides have to be located elsewhere; that is, no longer through critical distance from, but rather through the *immanent re-engineering of*, the techno-social body of the culture industry for the purpose of constructing a genuinely universal modernist culture adequate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Crucial here, I believe, are the untapped potentials of late capitalist digital technology. Indeed, the major cultural shift that has taken place over the past decades is the fundamental re-engineering of all forms of sociocultural ecologies according to the demands of increasingly ubiquitous, late capitalist digital technology. Yet the actual culture that has emerged out of this is, as we just saw, a disappointingly narrow human culture fuelled by formal nostalgia, a cult of the personae (from celebrities and television reality-stars to friends and acquaintances on social media), and widespread sociotechnical pathologies.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the gradual elimination of alien outsides by late capitalism can in many ways be understood in terms of its increasingly expansive mobilisation of digital technology. Or, to put it slightly differently, at the present moment *socio-technological implementation* seems to be more or less directly proportional to *aesthetic and sociocultural stagnation* – which surely is an uncomfortable trajectory that needs to be overturned by the remaking of technology as a means for reorienting culture beyond its immersion in the narrow realm of late capitalist interests. In that regard, it is unfortunate (although not very surprising) that the anti-capitalist responses to this veritable cultural and cognitive mutation often have taken the forms of analogue and physical nostalgia (e.g. for

the lost authenticity of analogue media and face-to-face communication). Without trying to undermine the importance underlying these concerns, I believe that a more interesting (indeed, necessary) trajectory is to immerse oneself fully in the aesthetic forms and sociocultural landscapes implicit in digital media technology. For the latter do not just come with new sets of demands, but also with novel kinds of *affordances* that contemporary artists and theorists would benefit immensely from identifying. This was one of the major cultural achievements of the greatest artists of the post-war decades, who – rather than simply equating the then novel analogue media technologies deployed by the culture industry with social oppression – were successful in disassociating them from kitsch and commerce and to utilise them for new kinds of formal and sociocultural experiments. My wager is that all forms of major technological shifts come with an expanded battery of formal and sociocultural opportunities, and that it is the struggles over these novel technological potentials that constitute the terrain of future cultural emancipation. Indeed, from the perspective of open-ended formal and sociocultural development advocated by this essay, the emergence of the digital merely marks another bifurcation point within this Promethean trajectory – and that to withdraw from its untapped potentials on the basis of nostalgia for previous aesthetic forms and sociocultural configurations also means withdrawing from the Promethean project concomitant with development in its genuinely modernist form.

Another way to articulate what is at stake here is in terms of what Jameson has identified as the cognitive discontinuity between the phenomenological experiences of individuals and the larger structural systems that condition these experiences, which is characteristic of modernity. For whereas in earlier (pre-modern and market capitalist) societies the social structures in which individual experience was embedded were still comprehensible from the perspective of unmediated experience, in societies of industrial and late capitalism this congruence between experience and structure falls apart insofar as structure expands beyond the cognitive comprehension of immediate experience. As he puts it:

At this point, the phenomenological experience of the individual subject, traditionally the supreme raw material of the work of art, becomes limited to a tiny corner of the world, a fixed camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. [...] There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can

say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience.<sup>20</sup>

Modernity may thus also be understood in terms of the sociocultural implementation of the cognitive disjunction indexed by the Copernican revolution – which no longer operates at a purely abstract level, but instead becomes an *immediate reality* – and the formal experiments of modernist art as critical instruments for scaling up (or ‘developing’) our cognitive interfacing with an increasingly complex reality by reorienting aesthetics beyond the confines of experiences of alienation to the impersonal realms indexed by alienations from experience. Here, aesthetics no longer simply operates within the moderate framework of immediate experience, but is instead utilised as a means for ‘cognitive reformatting’ (Franco Berardi) through the medium of formal alienation. And at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this remains an equally central task insofar as postmodernism’s turns inwards and backwards are symptoms of our inability to overcome this cognitive rift at the present – which indeed has widened dramatically with the emergence of the increasingly digital space of late capitalism. Yet in order to do so, there can be no turning back to the aesthetics and sociocultural ecologies of the analogue and industrial era, or to the paltry romanticism of ‘authentic experience’. What is necessary instead is to utilise the cognitive dissonance between techno-scientific structure and human experience as a critical foundation for the re-engineering of human culture through the unfolding of the alien outsides to be located beyond the immediate dreariness of late capitalist culture. In the end, this is also a struggle over time. It is well-known today that modernist art first emerged not long after modern history as a collective experience and time as a vector of social progression first were conceptualised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later gave rise to a temporal sensibility that came to fuel the cultural expectations that were crucial to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following capitalism’s relentless elimination of all kinds of antagonistic outsides, time has lost its forward-looking momentum and slowly been folded back onto itself in the form of a seemingly infinite present littered with temporal fragments of the past. In other words, temporal sensibilities are not simply given but made – and they condition the kinds of cultural expectations that fuel individual and collective imaginations. Hence, the question of how to aesthetically and culturally remake late capitalist technology in order to reclaim time as a vector of social progression is nothing but decisive at the present moment. And it is conse-



quently because of struggles such as these that the augmentations of the formal and sociocultural possibility spaces of the digital technologies of late capitalism are such crucial tasks. For it is only once these possibility spaces have been aesthetically articulated and socially distributed across the vectors of open-ended, unbound development that culture can shed its human mask and reorient itself towards the emancipatory realms of the outside.

### Notes

1. See Veal, D., ed. (2009) *Collapse V: The Copernican Imperative* (Falmouth: Urbanomic), p. 11.
2. This also allows me to address the understandable critique of high modernism as predominately white, male and heterosexual. For while this criticism certainly is justifiable, what its proponents often fail to recognise is the fact that the critical resources for overcoming this evident shortcoming are to be found *within* modernism itself. More specifically, in the notion of the plasticity of reality; for if reality indeed is infinitely plastic, then plasticity also encompasses human identity – including ethnic, gender and sexual identity – as well. Hence, one way to characterise the lack of ethnic, gender and sexual diversity in high modernism is in terms of a plasticity of reality that nevertheless usually was articulated from the perspective of a white, male and heterosexual subject who himself remained essentially static. Yet this identity restriction was recognised by many of the great post-war modernists, who compellingly utilised modernist aesthetics to transform the very understanding of modernist identity as such. The point here is thus not simply that whereas high modernism overall was mostly white, male and heterosexual, we should now invite its neglected subjects to participate in various forms of modernist experiments merely because of a commitment to equality (important as that is) – but rather that these minority subjects in fact already are situated much closer to the modernist understanding of the plasticity of identity insofar as their forced marginalisation has compelled them to reflect upon and augment identity beyond the fictive axioms of male, white heterosexuality. They are therefore *integral subjects* to the modernist project – as opposed to ‘just’ minorities that need to be recognised.
3. The problem with conflating the abstract vector of modernism with particular aesthetic forms is that it ends up reducing modernism’s formal plasticity to a finite set of aesthetic dimensions, while failing to see that modernism is in fact ‘n-dimensional’ (Adam Harper) – that is, without a pre-given set of formal dimensions and thus ultimately about *open-ended formal development*. For just like reality is infinitely plastic, so is modernist formalism – which, however, always has to be *implemented* in particular aesthetic forms in terms of a constantly expanding set of aesthetic, sociocultural and technological parameters.
4. See Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum Books), p. 377
5. Greenberg, C. (1965) ‘Modernist Painting’, in *Art & Literature*, No. 4, [http://www.tfreeman.net/Philosophy/330\\_files/Modernist%20Painting.pdf](http://www.tfreeman.net/Philosophy/330_files/Modernist%20Painting.pdf)
6. Ibid.
7. Bürger, P. (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 73-82.

8. Berman, M. (2010) *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso Books), p. 15.
9. Ibid. p 36.
10. Ibid. p. 98.
11. It has however been quoted by the intellectual historian Martin Jay from an interview that he did with Adorno during the preparation of his book on the history of the Frankfurt School. See Jay, M. (1996) *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (California: University of California Press), p. 359.
12. See Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, p. 126-127.
13. See Anderson, P. (1984) 'Modernity and Revolution', in *New Left Review* 1/144, <https://newleftreview.org/I/144/perry-anderson-modernity-and-revolution>
14. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 378.
15. See Huyssen, A. (1986) *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 153.
16. See Fisher, M. (2014) *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books), p. 11-14.
17. Hence the fundamental problem with the argument that novelty as such is overrated, and that we should give up on modernism's 'shock of the new'. This is indeed an index of a particularly crude form of cultural cynicism – to be compared to if we would suggest that scientists should stop exploring previously uncharted dimensions of reality – since it ultimately implies that we should stop thinking about culture as an instrument of cognitive subversion.
18. See Jameson, F. (1992) *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press), p. 48-49.
19. See Berardi, F. (2009) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions).
20. Jameson, F. (1990) 'Cognitive Mapping', in Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L., eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), [http://www.rainer-rilling.de/gs-villa07-Dateien/JamesonF86a\\_CognitiveMapping.pdf](http://www.rainer-rilling.de/gs-villa07-Dateien/JamesonF86a_CognitiveMapping.pdf)