

# Mark Fisher in Memoriam, Part 2: On Popular Modernism

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At a first glance, the ambition to align modernism with the popular may seem strange given that modernism indeed usually has been positioned as the critical antithesis to popular culture; perhaps most famously in the work of the Frankfurt School, the group of German intellectuals whose critical writings on modernism and popular culture from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century still belong to some of the most influential on these topics at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Indeed, in their writings, modernism is always pitted against the realm of popular culture – which they viewed with nothing but contempt because of how it puts people into uncritical passivity by providing illusory comfort through the fulfilment of prefabricated expectations and desires. For the Frankfurt School, popular culture – what they famously referred to as the ‘culture industry’ – is simply an extension of capitalism’s drive towards total control and domination into the realm of leisure time. However, while it may be tempting today to simply dismiss these ideas as representative of some kind of old-school elitism, it is important to remember when they first were articulated – during World War II, when the members of the Frankfurt School were forced to live in exile in the US, among other places, because of their Jewish heritage. There was thus a significant sense of totalitarian domination in the air at the time – both because of political dictators and from entertainment and consumer culture (this was during the golden age of the Hollywood studio-system, for instance) – which undoubtedly had major impact on the Frankfurt School’s bleak analyses of popular culture and Western society as a whole (perhaps most notably in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from 1947).

But with that said, the Frankfurt School’s sharp distinction between modernism and popular culture has proven increasingly difficult to defend after a number of post-war decades in which widespread modernist experimentation in popular cultural formats were flourishing in ways that do not sit easily with the idea of popular culture as a mere instrument of social oppression. Neither part of the conventions of the high modernism cherished by the Frankfurt School, nor simply another piece of mass culture, the post-war decades saw the emergence of aesthetic forms and cultural ecologies that do not fit into the cultural high-/low-distinction

established by canonical modernist thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg. But they are also not compatible with the postmodern frameworks that have been constructed in critical response to high modernism, and – while useful for drawing out some of its most severe limitations – too often ended up in a disappointingly bland ‘anything goes’ kind of relativism. Instead, these are cultural forms that took up the admirable task of constant formal innovation, and were thus not presented readymade to the audience (in terms of the patterns of formal standardisation that Adorno so despised about the cultural material favoured by the culture industry), but – like the best forms of art – instead are works that one often must learn to appreciate over time. Yet they did this in popular formats and thereby importantly overturned the high modernist distinction between authentic and popular culture by subverting the concomitant premise that the encounter between authentic and popular culture always has to result in the accommodation of the former to the latter. In that regard, their wider cultural import lies in the fact that increased mediation and technological reproduction does not necessarily have to lead to the narrowing of reality concomitant with the culture industry and post-modern consumer culture, but in fact provides fertile ground for augmenting the realm of authentic culture.

So, whereas Adorno only writes about the encounter between authentic and popular culture in negative terms – for instance, when classical music appears in commercials it loses its antagonistic force vis-à-vis popular culture, or the culture industry – aesthetic forms of the kind alluded to above invite us to think about this encounter differently (this does obviously not mean that Adorno’s analyses are incorrect, but rather that they are limited in scope). And what the emergence of these aesthetic forms and accompanying sociocultural ecologies therefore signified was a different framework for thinking about culture after the demise of what the cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen has named *The Great Divide* – ‘the kind of discourse that insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture’<sup>1</sup> – without collapsing into the bland cultural relativism of postmodernism. But whereas Huyssen sees this 60s pop sensibility as a relatively short-lived culmination of the aesthetic and sociocultural programs initiated a few decades earlier by the historical avant-garde, another way of looking at it is as the inception of post-war popular modernism.

The concept of popular modernism was coined by Mark in order to theorise the culture that he grew up with in post-war Britain and that formed him as an individual. For Fisher, cultural phenomena such as parts of the music press and public service television, Penguin paperbacks, post-punk, rave and brutalist architecture were all parts of an overarching cultural ecol-

ogy that came to set the standards of an entire generation of thinkers working at the intersection between so-called 'high theory' and popular culture. As he puts it in his most extensive discussion of the concept in his book *Ghosts of My Life*:

In popular modernism, the elitist project of modernism was retrospectively vindicated. At the same time, popular culture definitely established that it did not have to be populist. Particular modernist techniques were not only disseminated but collectively reworked and extended, just as the modernist task of producing forms which were adequate to the present moment was taken up and renewed.<sup>2</sup>

But beyond Mark's personal experiences, popular modernism is also an important concept insofar as it encompasses much of what was culturally progressive during the post-war decades – and in that way indexes an internal shift that took place in popular culture roughly from the 60s and onwards. In a series of essays on post-war popular culture in his book *After the Great Divide* from 1986, Andreas Huyssen makes a somewhat similar observation when he analyses a wave of pop-enthusiasm that became a crucial part of the New Left in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Oriented around cultural phenomena such as pop art, rock music, beat poetry, psychedelia, new criticism and the counterculture, pop became synonymous with the new lifestyles of the post-war youths and their rebellion against the norms of existing society. For this generation, pop was understood as a critique rather than as an affirmation of existing society, and as a way of getting out of the elitism of high modernism by overcoming the rift between high art and popular culture. As I mentioned earlier, whereas previous accounts of the former had been constructed to safeguard the integrity of authentic culture from the threat of totalitarian domination, the post-war decades instead saw the emergence of a different cultural sensibility. There were widespread beliefs that high modernism had lost its momentum and gone from being an adversary culture to a culture affirmative of the status quo, and that the new pop sensibility – in conjunction with novel media technologies and cultural criticism – was the way to move forward. Driven by visions of an alternative society that was to be realised through the widening of consciousness with the help of aesthetic and psychedelic experimentation, the critique of the institutionalisation of art, and the search for an alternative modern tradition beyond the classical canon, the notion of pop at work in culture at the time certainly had a very different connotation compared to what the likes of Adorno tended to associate it with. More specifically, Huyssen argues that the 60s pop sensibility may be characterised in terms of four different

components: firstly, a temporal imagination oriented towards a future that was conceived of in terms of a radical rupture from the present; secondly, a critique of aesthetic elitism (so-called 'aestheticism') and the institutionalisation of high modernist art; thirdly, a novel technological optimism that grew out of the new media technologies (television, video and the computer) and media theory at the time (McLuhan in particular); and finally, the inclusion of the various minority-cultures (e.g. female, non-white, non-hetero) that generally had not been part of the canon of high modernism, but that were to begin utilising various modernist resources in popular contexts in order to widen the parameters of human identity itself (whom the literary theorist Leslie Fiedler referred to as 'the new mutants' around this time).<sup>4</sup>

Central to this post-war cultural trajectory was a link between modernism and utopia that articulated itself in terms of confronting and breaking away from the seemingly given and the static conception of reality that goes with it. A standard criticism of utopian thinking is that it threatens to become a product of mere imagination that has nothing to do with how things actually are like. Yet utopian thinking can also have a mobilising potential, wherein its widening of the imagination may function as a resonating critique of the limitations of the present. Indeed, the reason why culture is important is because it can have profound impact on how one views reality and what kinds of expectations one may have of it. And whereas the oppressive capacities of culture may be understood in terms of how it reduces reality to a series of readymade spectacles – which of course are nothing but ideological constructions that are masked as actual reality – its creative potentials lie in how it may be utilised to make us question seemingly given realities and demand others instead. Hence, crucial to the post-war popular modernist imagination was what the political theorist Franco Berardi has referred to as a 'psychological perception' that emerged during the era of progressive modernity and reached a peak after World War Two – largely through the many cultural expectations it fabricated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> And during the post-war decades, it articulated itself in the form of a virtual continuum that unfolded itself through culture and constantly augmented people's expectations of what would come next on the basis of an understanding of reality as an inexhaustible reservoir of hidden dimensions to be unveiled and explored through popular culture and media technology.

Another way of characterising how this psychological perception articulated itself in post-war popular modernism – and in its high modernist predecessor – is in terms of what the literary theorist Darko Suvin has referred to as 'aesthetics of cognitive estrangement'.<sup>6</sup> Originally introduced by Suvin to define science fiction as a literary genre in his book *Metamorpho-*

*ses of Science Fiction* – and later elaborated on by the critical theorist Carl Freedman in his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*<sup>7</sup> – cognitive estrangement also turns out to be a useful resource for pinpointing the utopian underpinnings of (popular) modernist culture. In a discussion of the concept of utopia, Freedman – drawing upon the major utopian thinker Ernst Bloch – points out that the aesthetic potency of utopia lies in how certain works of art are capable of estranging the empirical reality of the present by introducing fragments of other realities that are radically different from our world as we know it. In that regard, they need to be sharply distinguished from realism, but also from mere fantasy – which tend to either simply affirm the world as it is (cognition), or invoke worlds and (non-) realities that have nothing to do with our own (estrangement). Contra mere cognition or estrangement, it is precisely the *dialectic* between the two that is crucial here – between a desire to constantly expand reality as we know it, but without lapsing into the supernatural. Hence, whereas an aesthetic of cognitive estrangement certainly may operate beyond the parameters of existing scientific knowledge, what differentiates it from fantasy are speculations on its cognitive impact on our human life-world and understanding of reality (whereas fantasy simply takes place in an alternate reality) in terms of what Freedman refers to as its *cognition effect*.<sup>8</sup> It is thus hyper-natural rather than supernatural, and also does not simply use technology and aesthetic experimentation as means for passively reproducing empirical reality – but for actively expanding it through spatiotemporal ruptures and augmentations that offer glimpses of alien realities possibly yet to come. Indeed, the worlds invoked by utopian aesthetics are fragmentary in their very nature insofar as they allude to realities that generally are far beyond our current comprehension. But this is what gives them their transformative potential, as Freedman puts it:

The estranging novelties that characterize [utopian aesthetics] is never a single element inserted into an essentially unchanged mundane environment, but is instead such a *radical* novelty as to reconstitute the entire surrounding world and thus, in a sense, to create (though certainly not *ex nihilo*) a new world.<sup>9</sup>

But here I need to make a distinction between two forms of cognitive estrangements: the *thematic* cognitive estrangements of science fiction – which usually express themselves through thematic content – and the *formal* cognitive estrangements of modernist art, which primarily operates through formal experiments. As is well known today, central to the aesthetics of 20<sup>th</sup> century high and popular modernism were their formal innovations – whose critique of previ-

ous aesthetic realism's inability to tap into the massive changes of the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century manifested itself in a plethora of formal experiments in all kinds of mediums: from cubist painting, atonal music and stream-of-consciousness writing in high modernism, to non-linear editing, synthetic sounds and glitch-art in popular modernism. It is thus precisely at the point of the cognitive disjunction between reality as we know it, and the encounter with different realities through aesthetics of formal cognitive estrangement, that the utopian potentials of modernist formal experimentation need to be located. The point here is not that there is something inherently wrong with aesthetics that focus on, for instance, everyday social or political issues mainly through content as opposed to form – that obviously has its place in addressing the many problems in our world as it is today – but rather that formal experimentation remains an important instrument for the equally central task of looking beyond immediate reality as such. Needless to say, content can never be fully detached from form, and vice versa – and there are of course also plenty of examples of artworks whose cognitive estrangements are both formal and thematic – so what is important here are aesthetics that *highlight* their formal properties and *rework* formal orthodoxy in ways that resonate with their content.

We may thus understand modernist aesthetics as aesthetics of formal cognitive estrangement, and the alien formal experiments of modernism – including the feelings of awe and wonder, and of no longer feeling at home in ourselves, which we often experience when encountering formally innovative artworks – as utopian fragments of possible future worlds that impregnate and transform the world of the present. Indeed, from a temporal perspective, the utopian worlds invoked by aesthetics of formal cognitive estrangement necessarily transcend the present from the perspective of the future – although not in the form of a predetermined future that can simply be deduced from the present, but rather in terms of an open future yet to be unfolded along a temporal trajectory that nevertheless is cognitively linked to the past and the present.

Hence, while the Frankfurt School were correct in designating culture with a utopian promise, they were (with obvious respect for the time that has passed since then) wrong in pitting this promise against the culture industry, since it has become increasingly evident during the decades since that utopian struggles must take place *within* the culture industry as such. These were the struggles initiated by post-war popular modernism – and they remain of highest relevance at the dawn of 21<sup>st</sup> century culture, when the popular has been reduced to populism, the underground suffers from prolonged formal stagnation, and utopian imagination

has flipped over into widespread dystopian dread. Indeed, this is when struggles over the utopian become more important than ever.

### Notes

1. Huyssen, A. (1986) *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. viii.
2. Fisher, M. (2014) *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books), p. 23.
3. See Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 141-221.
4. See Fiedler, L. (1999) 'The New Mutants', in Fielder, L., *A New Fiedler Reader* (New York: Prometheus Books), p. 189-210.
5. See Berardi, F. (2011) *After the Future* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press), p. 18.
6. See Suvin, D. (2016) *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang).
7. See Freedman, C. (2000) *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press).
8. Ibid. p. 17-19.
9. Ibid. p. 69.