

MODERNISM

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Modernism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, History, Art History, Sociology, Cultural Studies

1. Core Definition and Scope

Modernism is an overarching conceptual term describing a profound shift in Western culture, society, and thought that occurred primarily from the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries, although its philosophical roots extend back to the Enlightenment and the 17th century. Fundamentally, Modernism represents the transition from an archaic, tradition-bound understanding of the world--often rooted in classical or religious dogma--to one characterized by the embrace of **fresh ideas**, **scientific reasoning**, and an intense desire to break with the past. The conceptual scope of Modernism is exceptionally wide, touching virtually every academic and cultural discipline, including literature, visual arts, architecture, music, philosophy, and political theory. It embodies an aesthetic and philosophical commitment to progress and rationality, often viewing the past as a constraint to be overcome through innovation and self-conscious experimentation.

In the context of philosophy and sociology, Modernism is sometimes used interchangeably with **modernity**, designating the entire socio-historical epoch spanning roughly from the 17th century to the present day. This epoch is defined by the rise of industrial capitalism, the nation-state, bureaucratization, and secularization. However, when used specifically to denote the artistic and intellectual movements of the early 20th century, Modernism signifies a critical response to the conditions of modernity itself. It sought to find new forms of expression capable of capturing the fragmentation, speed, and alienation introduced by industrial society, marking a deliberate attempt to make culture "new" again.

The core principle, as derived from historical analysis, is the replacement of inherited norms with systematic, rational, and empirical approaches. This shift necessitated a fundamental restructuring of knowledge systems, moving the primary source of authority from tradition and faith to **scientific inquiry** and **human reason**. This intellectual transition laid the groundwork for the technological and social upheaval that defined the 20th century.

2. Philosophical and Historical Foundations

The historical trajectory leading to Modernism finds its critical juncture in the 17th-century Scientific Revolution and the subsequent Age of Enlightenment. Prior to this period, knowledge and societal structure were largely dictated by established religious institutions, particularly the Church, which often held a virtual monopoly on public discourse and education. The emergence of thinkers like René Descartes and Isaac Newton, emphasizing **methodological doubt** and **empirical**

observation, catalyzed a dramatic revaluation of truth. Descartes' famous assertion, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), shifted the epistemological foundation from external divine authority to the internal, rational subject.

This shift was inherently contested, as the source content notes, often being viewed as antithetical to existing social norms and religious dogma. The Enlightenment champions sought to apply reason to every area of human life, leading to the development of liberal political theories, human rights discourse, and the burgeoning belief in universal progress attainable through science. This foundation established the key modernist belief that society could be systematically improved and perfected through the application of rational principles, a stark contrast to earlier fatalistic or cyclical views of history.

By the late 19th century, the rapid acceleration of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization deepened the sense that traditional forms were inadequate to describe contemporary reality. Figures like Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud further dismantled established certainties regarding human nature, social organization, and cosmology, creating an intellectual environment ripe for radical artistic and philosophical departure. The need for a cohesive, scientifically compatible worldview drove the intensive intellectual experimentation characteristic of the high Modernist period (c. 1900-1945).

3. Key Characteristics of the Modernist Worldview

The Modernist mindset is defined by several interconnected characteristics that permeate its expression across various fields. A central characteristic is **epistemological optimism** regarding human capability. Despite recognizing the chaos and fragmentation of modern life, Modernists generally believed that human creativity and scientific methods could ultimately impose order, meaning, and structure upon this chaos. This manifested in art through a belief in the ability of the artist, acting as a visionary, to create universal truths through novel techniques.

Another defining trait is **Formal Experimentation**. Modernists rejected realism and traditional aesthetics, viewing them as exhausted or dishonest forms incapable of representing the complexity of the machine age. In literature, this led to techniques like stream of consciousness (e.g., James Joyce) and fragmented narratives (e.g., T.S. Eliot). In visual arts, it drove the move toward abstraction, cubism, and expressionism (e.g., Picasso, Kandinsky), prioritizing subjective perception and formal structure over mimetic representation. The famous modernist dictum, "Make it new," encapsulates this dedication to formal innovation.

Furthermore, Modernism embraced **Secularization and Individualism**. As scientific method replaced religious authority, the individual--their psychology, their subjective experience, and their alienation--became the central subject of inquiry. The Modernist focus shifted inward, exploring the fractured self in a rapidly changing world. This often resulted in deeply psychological works that

probed the subconscious mind, reflecting the impact of Freudian theories on cultural thought.

4. Modernism in Arts and Culture

The cultural manifestations of Modernism were revolutionary, aiming for a total break from 19th-century Romanticism and Victorian morality. In architecture, Modernism, exemplified by the Bauhaus movement and figures like Le Corbusier, promoted functionalism and the idea that form should follow function, stripping away unnecessary ornamentation to reveal the building's essential structure. This approach sought to create environments suited for the industrial, democratic age, prioritizing **efficiency** and **mass production**.

In literature, Modernism was characterized by a critique of bourgeois values and an attempt to capture the fluidity of temporal experience. The narrative voice became unreliable, challenging the reader to piece together meaning from discontinuous fragments. Key literary techniques associated with this movement include **interior monologue**, **mythic parallelism** (using ancient myths to structure modern narratives), and a profound sense of cultural disillusionment following World War I, which shattered the Enlightenment belief in inevitable progress.

Music similarly underwent a radical transformation, moving away from established tonal systems. Composers like Arnold Schoenberg developed **atonality** and the twelve-tone technique, systematically rejecting centuries of musical tradition in favor of new mathematical and structural rules. These artistic movements shared a common philosophical thread: the belief that the material and intellectual conditions of modern life demanded entirely new aesthetic languages.

5. The Challenge to Traditional Authority and Religion

The historical transition highlighted in the source material--the shift away from the Church's monopoly--is central to understanding the sociopolitical impact of Modernism. The Enlightenment provided the logical tools for this challenge, but Modernism provided the cultural and scientific infrastructure to execute it fully. The proliferation of scientific theories, such as Darwinian evolution and astronomical cosmology, directly contradicted literal religious interpretations, leading to a pervasive sense of **secularization** within Western intellectual circles.

This challenge extended to political authority. Modernism was often aligned with democratic, socialist, or even radical political movements that sought to dismantle hierarchical, inherited power structures. The commitment to rationality implied that social and political systems, like scientific problems, could be engineered and optimized for better human outcomes, rejecting the divine right of kings or the inherent superiority of established classes.

The intellectual confrontation created a societal tension where traditionalists perceived modernizing forces as moral decay and cultural chaos. Modernism, in turn, often embraced this

conflict, viewing the rejection of its ideas by traditional institutions as proof of its own revolutionary necessity. This tension between innovation and tradition became one of the defining struggles of the 20th century, influencing everything from education reform to political ideologies.

6. Psychology and the Modern Subject

A critical development within Modernism was the deep integration of psychological theory, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud, into cultural understanding. The Modernist artist often saw the individual mind, rather than the external world, as the true frontier for exploration. Freudian concepts of the subconscious, repression, and the complex inner life provided a framework for understanding human behavior that superseded simple moral or religious explanations.

This focus resulted in literary and artistic works that prioritized stream of consciousness and nonlinear time, reflecting the chaotic, non-rational structure of the mind as theorized by psychology. The modern subject was no longer seen as a coherent, rational agent but as a battleground of conflicting desires, memories, and impulses. This psychological introspection allowed Modernists to address the trauma and fragmentation experienced in industrialized society, lending credence to the idea that modern life inherently leads to spiritual and emotional distress.

In essence, Modernism internalized the scientific critique of the external world, turning the rational gaze upon the human condition itself. This shift defined the modern era's obsession with identity, subjectivity, and the often-elusive nature of personal truth, further cementing the break from communal, tradition-based identity structures.

7. Debates, Criticisms, and the Rise of Postmodernism

While Modernism championed rationality and the possibility of creating universal structures of meaning, it faced significant internal and external criticisms. One major critique, particularly after the devastating global conflicts of the 20th century (WWI and WWII), centered on the perceived failure of reason. If scientific progress and rational planning were the promised tools of human perfection, how could they have resulted in unprecedented levels of destruction and totalitarianism? This failure led many critics to question the foundational **modernist grand narratives**--the belief in objective truth, linear progress, and the autonomous subject.

The most significant philosophical challenge to Modernism came from Postmodernism, which began to take shape in the mid-20th century. Postmodernists argue that the Modernist attempt to create overarching, universal systems of thought ultimately led to exclusion and oppression. They reject the possibility of universal truth or objective meaning, celebrating instead fragmentation, contingency, and the subjective nature of interpretation. Postmodernism views the rational, unified subject idealized by Modernism as a fictional construct.

Specific criticisms leveled against the movement include its alleged **elitism** and inaccessibility. Modernist art, with its complex formal experiments and intellectual demands, often alienated the general public, leading to accusations that it served only a small, educated elite rather than fulfilling its promise of creating a new culture for the masses. Furthermore, some critics argue that Modernism, despite its revolutionary rhetoric, remained fundamentally embedded in a colonialist and patriarchal structure, failing to adequately address issues of race, gender, and imperial power structures.

8. Key Concepts and Components

Rationality and Empiricism: The foundational reliance on scientific method and measurable, observable data as the primary source of truth, replacing theological or inherited dogma.

Epistemological Rupture: The self-conscious break from past artistic, philosophical, and social conventions, marked by the belief that the modern age requires entirely new ways of knowing and representing reality.

Urbanization and Alienation: The sociological context of Modernism, driven by mass migration to industrial cities, leading to themes of isolation, psychological fragmentation, and the loss of traditional community bonds explored heavily in literature and film.

Primitivism and Myth: A paradoxical characteristic where Modernists, while rejecting history, often turned to non-Western, "primitive" cultures or ancient myths (e.g., Jungian archetypes) as sources of authentic, primal energy missing in industrialized Western society.

9. Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Modernism](#) (General Overview)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Postmodernism](#) (Context and Critique)

[Wikipedia: The Enlightenment](#) (Historical Precursor)