Encounters between Art, Humanity and the Modern

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Without the concepts of modernity, modernism and modernisation, it would be hard to talk about the arts of the 20th century and about their relationship with the reality of their own time. Modernisation, as a societal and social phenomenon from the first decades of the 19th century onwards, meant rapid technological development, industrialisation and urbanisation. As the means of livelihood and the norms regulating communities changed, individual people’s lives and living environments changed, too. Art also changed and particularly rapidly in the early years of the 20th century, when the old societal structures of western countries with monarchies were creaking at the seams.¹

From the 19th century onwards one of the major ideological and political shifts in European modernisation was the strengthening of the ideal of the nation and the founding of nation states. Technological development went hand in hand with innovations in the sciences and created the potential for unprecedented economic growth. The spiritual and practical ascendancy of ecclesiastical institutions was called into question and rational information offered itself as a basis for modern world views. Individuals appeared to have a new potential to shape their own lives and surroundings through education and new channels of social influence. The option of calling into question and breaking down trade, class and gender boundaries that predetermined people’s lives, if and when they were experienced as a threat to self-determination, has contributed to the modern conception of what it is to be human.

In Finland modernisation advanced rapidly from the mid-19th century onwards. Urbanisation accelerated in the mid-20th century, with the biggest wave of migration from the countryside to the city not being seen until the 1960s, while, for instance, the expansion of the forestry industry and power generation provided a major boost to the development of modern technology. The extension of basic education in the second half of the 19th century to include the entire Finnish population substantially created the capacity for absorbing new information and for the advance of modernisation.

In the cultural history of Finland of the end of the 19th century the development of industry, technology, culture and art were closely interlinked. In the spirit of the national

ideal it was considered important that the most up-to-date international visual art would also construct a national cultural identity, and hence promote Finland’s much-desired national independence. It was on this foundation that the historical narrative of what is known as the ‘Golden Age of Finnish Art’, which culminated in 20th-century art, was constructed.

Twentieth-century historiography has often interpreted modern phenomena in Finnish visual art since the start of the 20th century as a counter-reaction by that generation of young artists, initially to the Golden Age and later to the established art world. The revolutionary periods in visual art in the 1910s and 1950s, known as the breakthroughs of modernism, occurred in tandem with corresponding international phenomena. Interpretative friction was generated in Finnish art discourses far into the 20th century by the collision between national – i.e. locally anchored – values and the principles of modern art, which were seen as universal.
Modern art in the modern world

In the interpretation of art, a fundamental question is raised as to how the modern world and modern art are linked. The art-historical approach has been to write the story of 20th-century modern art from the viewpoint of visual art styles. The concept of artistic modernism, however, is an umbrella term that covers numerous movements or ‘isms’, from Impressionism and Cubism to Surrealism and Constructivism. Within all of these, what has primarily been sought has been evidence of a process of continual renewal and previously unseen ways of handling the basic formal elements of an artwork: colour, form and space.

For example, the thoroughgoing renewal of form has often been seen as a primary value in modern art. The arrival of what is known as abstract, non-figurative expression at the start of the 20th century has certainly been ranked as one of the greatest achievements in the history of modernism. This change occurred around the same time in the works of several artists, including Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and František Kupka, in different parts of Europe around 1910. The development of narratives related to the birth of abstract art that compete for the prestige of being the earliest-ever abstract artwork, have guaranteed for these big names in the history of modernism a place in modern culture as supreme creative individuals, and a place for their works in the front rank of the canon of modern art. Pablo Picasso never totally abandoned the figurative components of the image in his paintings, and yet the birth of one of the best-known modern ‘isms’, Cubism – also in the 1910s – bears his signature, along with that of Georges Braque.

Modern art, especially in its radical avant-garde forms, is also linked to the ideological and political phenomena of the 20th century. At the end of the 1910s, the Russian avant-garde was bound up with the Russian Revolution and an attempt to erase the past by means of
aesthetic radicalism. One of the most iconic works – and acts – of the 20th-century modern avant-garde was the inclusion of Kazimir Malevich’s painting *Black Square* in the ‘0.10’ exhibition of Futurist art in Petrograd (later Leningrad and St Petersburg) in 1915. The canvas, painted with a black square on a white ground, was hung in a corner of the exhibition space, a place that in Russian tradition was usually reserved for Christian icons.2

The idea of the creative artist as a prophetic visionary and creator of new culture was reinforced as part of the ideological and philosophical foundation of the modern world. This idea developed at the same time that world views based on religion were being called into question. The theory of evolution published by Charles Darwin in 1859 challenged the traditional western conception of humanity and, in turn, added fuel to the increasing influence of spiritualistic mental models of the modern age. These included the idea of ‘creative evolution’, proposed by the fashionable early 20th-century French philosopher Henri

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Bergson (1859–1941), which challenged Darwin’s positivist-scientific world view. A definitive account of Bergson’s spiritual theory of evolution appeared in 1908.3

One offshoot of Bergson’s creative evolution takes us towards the expansion and perfection of human culture and spiritual consciousness. According to Bergson, the human creative capacity culminates in the creative work of the artist. According to Bergson, the true essence of life or the universe is hidden from ordinary human beings, between whose consciousness and the nucleus of reality hangs a veil woven from the exigencies of practical life. In the case of artists and poets, however, that veil is very thin, and hence the artist has an exceptional ability to grasp the original intention of creative reality. Creative artists are thus able to put themselves inside the object of their observation, and to create an absolutely new art, whose content is always a unique part of the current of creative evolution.4

The genius myth associated with being an artist stretches much further back than Bergson’s thinking at the turn of the 20th century, but such lines of thought updated the notion of the artist-genius for the needs of the new century. The idea of exceptional individuals who have the ability to see to the hermetic core of reality is already in itself exclusive, and makes it possible for chosen seer-artists also to have a special role in a modern

society that is ostensibly based on rational thought. The fortified genius myth, combined with the art world’s power structures have also been instrumental in excluding a great number of the artists of the age of modernism – particularly women – from the ranks of the chosen. It is only in the 2000s that this image has begun to change, now that, for example, the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint and her works have been ‘discovered’ alongside those of the early abstractionists of the 1910s.5

A new boundary has also been drawn around the creative arts in relation to art culture, such as to photography, film and the industrial arts that were born in the modern technologising world. The status of these media as art was disputed right up to the end of the 20th century. For example, the role played by the innovative, ambitious modernist industrial arts in the construction of Nordic civil society from the 1930s onwards is a recognised fact.6 The assumption of the spiritualising potential of the creative artist genius without ties to society’s economic functions such as industry, has, nevertheless, occasionally led to the very art that is considered profound and autonomous being restricted to its own sphere.7

The human being in the modern world

Art in the modern world can also be viewed from the perspective of a broader, modern experience, so that the inevitable link between the individual living in the world and their environment takes centre stage.8 According to the social philosopher Marshall Berman, the early writers and thinkers who dealt with modernity, such as Goethe, Hegel, Marx, Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, focussed specifically on this connection. In this way of thinking, what is significant from the perspective of the observation of modern culture and art is not generalising theses about the autarchical spirituality of art or its societal-economic boundaries, but, as Berman writes, the actual experience of living in a maelstrom of constant disintegration and renewal:

To be modern, [I said], is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one’s own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.9

The more complicated the definition and evaluation of 19th- and 20th-century modernisms from the viewpoint of history have become, the more often the writings of the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) have been taken up for re-examination. Berman says that if we had to name the first modernist, undoubtedly it would be Baudelaire.10 This is the case, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that in Baudelaire’s writings on art and life the significance of the modern is ultimately left without a proper definition.

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5 An extensive exhibition of Hilma af Klint’s works has been shown in the 2010s in several European countries, starting in Stockholm in 2013. See Hilma af Klint. Abstrakt pionjär. Stockholm: Moderna Museet 2013.
9 Berman 1988 [1982], 345–46.
10 Berman 1988 [1982], 133.
Baudelaire wrote about what it is to be a modern person in the modern world, which in his case was the Paris metropolis. That is why Baudelaire’s views on modern life are linked particularly strongly to the forms of the modern city and the urban aesthetic.

In Baudelaire’s writings artists have a special role in their modern community. In his essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, published in 1863, Baudelaire profiles the nature and social position of the modern painter. The artists he describes have a childlike ability to see everything anew, to be continually intoxicated by influences, in their minds they are possessed by a tumult of images. Baudelaire urges us to think of the painter of modern life: ‘as an eternal convalescent’, ‘a man possessing at every moment the genius of childhood [...] for whom no edge of life is blunted’.11

According to Baudelaire, the modern artist’s senses that devour the modern world are affected by a two-fold beauty. ‘Beauty is made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable, though to determine how much of it there is, is extremely difficult, and, on the other, of a relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion. Without this second element, which is like the amusing, teasing, appetite-whetting coating of the divine cake, the first element would be indigestible, tasteless, unadapted and inappropriate to human nature. I challenge anyone to find any sample whatsoever of beauty that does not contain these two elements.’12

One of the interesting aspects of Baudelaire’s writings is the building of a bridge between the physical and the material and, on the other hand, the spiritual view sub specie aeternitatis.


Thus Baudelaire links artistic creativity and artworks to the moment in hand and to all that observation of it can produce, since ‘almost all our originality comes from the stamp that “time” imprints upon our feelings’.13 His copious references to fashion and modes of dress culminate in his description of the modern human being and artist living in the modern urban community, of the dandy, of his outward demeanour and inner world. The dandy is a male type whose passion is above all being conspicuous, for instance, with his impeccable dress, which is the most effective means of standing out from the crowd.

The dandy is an exceptional individual, whose sole mission is to foster the idea of beauty in himself, to satisfy his own passions, to feel and to think.14 The dandy’s inner world is defined by the cult of the self, which seeks happiness within itself. The image of dandyism also includes suffering, melancholy and preparation for the continual loss produced by changes in the modern world.15 To generalise, we could say that Baudelaire’s dandy takes to an extreme the constant construction and reconstruction of the unstable self by an individual who is subject to the time pressures of the modern world.

Stepping into the role of the dandy was popular among young artists at the beginning of the 20th century as they sought their own place on the modern art and artists’ scene. In the case of Finns, this meant study trips to the metropolises of Europe – especially Paris – which, besides studying the new art, also meant learning about urban life. An explicit rejection

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of convention and outright rebellion against prevailing aesthetic and moral values were part of the modern artist’s role. Defiance and questions related to the self and identity were also visible in the self-portraits and other depictions of humanity painted by Finland’s young modernist artists.16

Baudelaire also left a powerful impression by bringing the themes of suffering, ugliness and evil into his essays and into the poems in his collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*, 1857), occasionally, almost as a macabre aestheticised part of the modern mental landscape. The contradictions and the descent into the dark side of the human mind evinced by the poems challenged the mores of their time and provoked charges of indecency.17 The ethics of suffering and of overcoming it are also linked in Baudelaire’s thinking with the role models for the modern artist’s life, which include the idea of the artist as an agonised, Christ-like martyr figure. The heroes of modern art in modernist cultural understanding include, for example, Vincent van Gogh – or in Finland the writer Aleksis Kivi – whose artistic greatness is seen through their increasing suffering – or posthumously beyond earthly suffering.

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16 In her doctoral thesis *Ideal and Disintegration. Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de Siècle*, published in 2014, Marja Lahelma investigates, among other things, modern self-portraits, and says in the summary of the research that the question related to self-portraits, ‘Who am I?’ could at the turn of the 20th century be better put as, ‘What is the I?’ Helsinki: Unigrafi, 2014, 244.

The present, art and everyday life

In his book Kirjallisuus ja nykyaika (Literature and the Present), published in 1994, the Finnish literary scholar Pertti Karkama explores the history of Finnish literature from the viewpoint of modernisation, with the aim of making visible phenomena to which the traditional canon of the history of literature has paid little attention. He focuses on those individuals living in the modernising world, who react individually to their own era in resolving the challenges of their own lives. Modernisation is, in fact, according to Karkama, always a question of identity, a process of individualisation or individuation, through which the individual develops into a subject living and acting in the modern world.\(^{18}\)

Modern culture has been characterised by the division of various societal and communal activities into autonomous areas, whose content is gauged according to special principles of appraisal specific to the genre. Alongside literature, the other disciplines of modern art and visual culture are a good example of this, be they visual art, industrial art, literature or music. Modernism’s way of speaking about modern art has often drawn attention, for example, to the properties of visual art’s colours and forms, to figuration or non-figuration, and to the newness or traditionality of an artist’s mode of expression.

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By extending the meaning of modernisation in the history of literature Karkama has brought into the spotlight everyday life and the modern human’s everyday experience, plus the complex interrelationships between literature and the everyday, and brought the appraisal of art culture closer to the life of the so-called ‘ordinary’ person. Such an approach also makes possible a more egalitarian exploration of literature written by women. With modernisation, women, who in patriarchal society generally have been compelled to adopt, for instance, the contents of aesthetic activities on the basis of men’s experiences, in practice stepped onto the stage of artistic activity in greater numbers. ‘Literature written by women is on the increase and the woman’s viewpoint that arises out of the private sphere is breaking into the public realm and calling its contents into question’, Karkama writes.\(^{19}\) The same phenomenon also applies to visual art.

The modern (verbal) artwork thus paints a portrait of the modern human being in the modern world in a very pragmatic way. The idea of the modern human need constantly to renew one’s own identity has led some researchers to view modern art through the way it reflects existential angst and life choices. Karkama says that a prerequisite for the genesis of modern literature in particular, along with the modern subject, is alienation. This implies a contradiction prevailing between the approaches and sign systems that have developed through history and the individual’s own life experiences.\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Karkama 1994, 11–12.

In modern literature life’s major turning points are associated with experiences of emptiness – alienation, boredom and melancholia – these are frequently recurring themes, which derive from the modern human’s freedom of choice and the unavoidability of making choices. We can also ask whether the depictions that are so common – including in Finnish art – of deserted city streets, for example, can be interpreted from the point of view of modern alienation. Streetscapes that are either totally or almost completely devoid of people were depicted by a significant number of Finnish artists in the interwar period in the 1920s and 1930s, with locations including both that popular destination for study trips, Paris, and Finnish cities. This phenomenon can, indeed, also be explained from the viewpoint of modernist treatment of form. The geometric lines of the city streets and houses certainly offered plentiful topics for the study of artistic composition and use of colour.

The modern dystopia

In parallel with the positivist future utopias associated with modernist avant-garde art since the start of the 20th century, we can also recognise a dystopia based on the unpredictability of modern development. The idea according to which the development of western countries – instead of a future made happy by modernisation – is heading towards perdition, was reinforced in the early 20th century before the First World War.

In 1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance, the literature researcher Thomas Harrison deals with the aesthetic revolution around 1910 as a collective, dystopic manifestation of
disorder and disintegration. The aesthetic of decadence and discord that he adumbrates touches on the poetry, visual art and music of the period that he investigates, one of the key figures being the pioneer of abstract visual art Wassily Kandinsky. Harrison focuses on contemporaneous phenomena in the culture of central Europe – including Trieste, Budapest, Munich and Vienna – and asks whether there is a factor that connects the individual works of art reflecting unease and destructive forces with their makers:

Called nihilism in philosophy and expressionism in the arts, it comprises a vision of history as nightmare, an obsession with mortality and decay, a sense of human marginalisation from the autonomous developments of culture, and the responses they spur. Its protagonists are the student Michelstaedter and a set of his intellectual peers: Georg Trakl, Dino Campana and Rainer Maria Rilke; Vasily Kandinsky, Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka; Georg Lukács, Martin Buber and Georg Simmel; Arnold Schoenberg, Scipio Slataper and Wilhelm Worringer.\(^\text{21}\)

Harrison describes the culmination of modern art in 1910 as a point in history at which faith in positive forces that advanced societal development, in rational thought, and in the possibility of genuinely sharing human values, waned in the cultural circles that he describes. In its place came anxiety and modern art, which had taken the form of an expressionism that turned towards human inner worlds, basing itself on the necessity and the right to manifest primarily subjective experience. According to Harrison, this phenomenon elevated chaos

over order, sickness over health, and in place of universal understanding came alienation, while in place of wholeness came disintegration. The works manifest the psychological and metaphysical drama of being in the world, a drama that is enacted, for instance, in the body's violent suffering.22

The expressionistic modern that Harrison defines is epitomised by the self-portrait The Red Gaze, painted in 1910 by the composer Arnold Schönberg – whose red eyes, and expression of pained, fearsome defiance are, according to the writer, a remnant of what once was a human being. In the first half of the 20th century, Schönberg, who painted as well as being a composer, was among the developers of atonal music. The traditional system of harmony in music, with its regular major and minor scales, was dismantled and in its place came the new 12-tone scale that treated musical elements more freely, and which represents the 20th-century modernist approach to composition.

22 Harrison 1996, 14.
In the history of western modern art, the period around 1910 marked a time of change, even without the development being seen in the nihilistic light that Harrison describes. Something happened, something that, for example, Virginia Woolf registered in an essay published in 1924: ‘On or about December 1910 human character changed.’23 Something also happened around that time in Finland’s art and art world. The new generation in visual art, with Tyko Sallinen as its figurehead, entered the scene and called into question the ascendancy of the authority figures of the previous generation. Sallinen’s new paintings from around 1910 look like reflections quivering on a weatherbeaten surface, in a state of erosion.

Composer Jean Sibelius’ Symphony No. 4 was completed in 1911. Its form and mode of expression are said to be exceptionally modern, personal and expressive when viewed in the context of the composer’s output in the first half of the 20th century. In 1916, in F. E. Sillanpää’s debut novel Elämä ja aurinko (Life and Sun) the connection between the human being and nature is seen from a new viewpoint, in a vitalist spirit depicting life forces. Edith Södergran’s debut collection of poems Dikter (Poems) was published the same year.

23 Harrison’s reference, see Harrison 1996, 15.
Modernity, modernism, paradox

The period of modernism that roughly spans the 20th century believed strongly in the potential of human creativity manifested in art, at a time when a new, better world was being built that relied on the innovations of science and technology. The history of interpretations of modern art is, however, more complicated: living side by side in them are a utopia and a dystopia, a collective and, on the other hand, an individual construction of identities, plus participation or outsidership as alternative ways of relating to the modern world. These different viewpoints have produced vehemently conflicting explanations for the basic questions of modern art and humanity.

Starting from the final decades of the 20th century, the vigorous self-assessment of modernism and modernity has also produced increasingly forceful talk of the inherently paradoxical nature of modernism and, on the other hand, of the multiplicity that inevitably negates its values and meanings, which are sometimes seen as being universal. In Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité (The Five Paradoxes of Modernity), published in 1990, the literary scholar Antoine Compagnon writes about the continuum that begins with Baudelaire, in which faith in the future and nihilism alternate, and in which a teleological faith in development finds itself opposed to experiences of absurdity and emptiness. In the end, it was specifically
the poet of the urban modern, Baudelaire, who launched the religion of the new, and who ultimately also implanted the cult of melancholy in modern self-understanding. On an individual level the paradox of living in the modern world is manifest as an exhausting quest for equilibrium between collective and individual demands and ideals.24

Understood as a herald of heroic progress, modernism defined itself in relation to opposing aspirations: to tradition and to other phenomena in art and culture that are labelled anti-modernist. In any case with the arrival of the new millennium, modernism and its ideals have been judged as consigned to history. In retrospect, the line between phenomena that are interpreted as modern or anti-modern has often seemed, at the least, to be unstable. In his essay ‘The Art of the Novel’ the author Milan Kundera writes:

There is the modern art that, in lyrical ecstasy, identifies with the modern world. Apollinaire. Glorification of the technical, fascination with the future. Along with and after him: Mayakovsky, Léger, the Futurists, the various avant-gardes. But opposite Apollinaire is Kafka: the modern world seen as a labyrinth where man loses his way. The modernism that is anti-lyrical, anti-romantic, skeptical, critical. [...] The farther we advance into the future, the greater becomes this legacy of ‘antimodern modernism’.25

The further into the 20th century we view modernism from, the more powerful are the interpretations that underscore melancholy or nostalgia and the more frequently one comes across the idea of the role of the modern artist as someone who observes and experiences the modern world as an outsider. For example, in her *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning*, published in 2013, Sanja Bahun interprets modernist novel-writing as in its very starting points manifesting melancholy and the ultimate loss of permanent identities certainly by the time of the inter-world war period.26

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The art-history heritage of the 20th century contains a huge number of works produced by the modernist 20th century, in which, independent of the interpretational framework, it is always in some way a matter of showing the place of the human being in their own reality. The gaze that scrutinises modernism in retrospect and more or less from the outside no longer needs to evaluate works by seeking the heroism of abstract form or the absolute novelty produced by art. Just the opposite, an important task of museums and curators is to suggest new interpretations and historical narratives. We encounter artists who have always lacked the halo of the genius or the martyr. We can now take seriously those who have been thrust or have strayed into the anti-modernist margins of art, and we can read even richer meanings in the everyday moments from modern life captured in their works.