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The Painting of
Postmodern Life?

T. J. Clark

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I have been thinking for the past several weeks about modernism, postmodernism, and steam. Partly this was accidental. It so happened that I opened the pages of *The New York Times* in late October to this photograph, of an open-air installation piece by Tony Oursler – a huge, and, by the look of it, frightening, image of a face projected on a cloud of water vapor. The face, as those of you familiar with Oursler’s cast of image-characters will immediately guess, cannot stop talking. It has a lot on its mind. Gradually you begin to gather from its ranting monologue that the face’s main problem is the Internet. The face is a ghost, or a soul, or a spirit seeking rest after death – part of a great family of such spirits. And rest has become impossible. For some reason the Internet has invaded the world of these spirits, and taken over their wavelengths. So they are coming back to do battle with the digital enemy. Real ghosts want room not to breathe in. How can people die, finally, if their last resting place is continually invaded by fragments of drivel from the chat room? Oursler calls his installation *The Influence Machine*. I see it as a kind of technological, digitized replay of the scenario played out at the end of W. B. Yeats’s great poem, *The Cold Heaven*:

... Ah! When the ghost begins to quicken [asks Yeats],
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

The question that closes Yeats’s poem is a real one, or real to the poet, and meant to occur to the reader as real. Yeats believed in ghosts, and certainly believed in the possibility of endless agony, powered forever by unfulfillment – not stopped for a minute by mere physical extinction. Yeats was a modernist, in short. He thought life had some horrible, but also ecstatic and beautiful, core; and that the task of art was to plunge the reader or viewer back into that horror and ecstasy, at least for as long as the poem lasts. I take it that Tony Oursler does not share that ambition. His ghosts are not for real. Or rather, for the space of the artwork, we are meant to be in two minds about whether we should take them seriously or not – whether taking the artwork seriously involves taking them *unseriously*. Whether, for instance, we should take the faces as a kind of metaphor (and here might be their seriousness) for the *wish* for a life of the spirit that goes on unappeasably haunting our present ideology of information. In other words, these are the ghosts that the *Internet* dreams up, as part of the hopeless array of occultism and “spirituality” that dances attendance on the disenchantment of the world. “The occultist,” as Theodore Adorno put it long ago, “draws the ultimate conclusion from the fetish character of commodities: the menace of objectified labor attacks him on all sides as an asset of objects, demonic and grimacing.... The bent little fortune tellers terrorizing their clients with crystal balls are toy models of the great ones who hold the fate of mankind in their hands.” This seems to

speak to the Oursler, somehow. The Oursler knows it is *playing* at terrorizing us. It is proud to display its terror apparatus. Steam and video are its media. It is a machine – Oursler’s title insists on the fact. And the machine is meant not to convince us. We shall never wipe the postmodern smile off our faces.

Once I had seen the photograph of the Oursler, and started to think about the way it spoke to our present utopia of information, I could not stop coming up with points of comparison for it from the art of the last 150 years. I thought of the end of modernism in the late 1960s, and of steam, in Robert Morris, as the figure of that ending. I thought of Morris’s steam piece as a kind of literalization of the previous century’s pursuit of abstraction, reduction, and dematerialization – its wish to give art over to the moment, the event, to pure contingency. I had my doubts about what Morris’s literalization of these impulses did – whether to literalize them was to banalize them – but at least I understood, or thought I understood, where Morris was coming from. And I knew he knew he was at the end of something, so maybe even the banality of the metaphor was deliberate – it showed us what modernism amounted to in 1968. This still left me with the problem of what Oursler achieves by giving Morris’s steam a face. That is, by projecting onto modernism’s emptying and dispersed this fiction, this figure, this stream of words.

Then of course I began to realize that steam, in the art of the last two centuries, was never unequivocally a figure of emptying and evanescence. It was always also an image of power. Steam could be harnessed, steam could be compressed. Steam was what initially made the machine world possible. It was the middle term in mankind’s great reconstruction of Nature. *Rain, Steam and Speed* is the title of the Turner. The speed that steam produces turns the world into one great vortex, one devouring spectral eye, where rain, sun, cloud, and river are seen, from the carriage window, as they have never been seen before. Steam is power and possibility, then; but also, very soon, it is antiquated – it is a figure of nostalgia, for a future, or a sense of futurity, that modernity had at the beginning but could never make come to pass. Hence the trails or puffs of steam forever on the horizons of de Chirico’s dreams. A train races by across the Imperial desert. It looks as though the Banana Republic is producing the requisite goods. Or are we visitors, tourists, gawping at ruins half-overtaken by the sand? Is modernity spreading and multiplying to the ends of the earth – setting up its statues and smokestacks, having its great city perspectives march off into the distance, as far as the eye can see? Or is this already a retrospect, a collection of fragments? A cloud of steam in de Chirico is often glimpsed between the columns of an endless, empty arcade. Once upon a time the arches led to the station, and people hurried to catch the express. Not any more. Once upon a time people gloried in the vastness of the new perspectives, and built themselves dream houses devoted to the worship of the machine. But modernity was always haunted by the idea that this moment of dreaming, of infinite possibility, was over. That is what is meant, I think, by de Chirico’s great title of 1914, *Nostalgia of the Infinite*. Of course we know that the year in question

is fated, and fatal, and was sensed to be so even at the time – you did not have to be de Chirico to feel, in 1914, that the infinite was about to be put to death. But even here, at this terrible turning point, the nostalgia is strong.

We could ask of the Tony Oursler, on the other hand, whether in it steam and the machine have left in them any suggestion – any memory of possibility and power. Or are they now nothing but mechanisms of control and illusion? *The Influence Machine*, Oursler calls his piece. Influence is a dead, dispiriting word. In America, influence is up for sale. The men and women in the Galerie des Machines in 1889, which is what we are looking at now on the right-hand screen, are not “influenced” by the mechanics of modernity. They are dwarfed by it, maybe, crushed by it; but also elated and magnified by it. The machines are their creations. Adorno is doubtless right that objectified labor is menacing, and in a sense demonic; but in modernity it is also wonderful, heavenly. If Oursler’s machine no longer plays out this dialectic, then it may be true that we have left modernity behind.

My final comparison with the Oursler, therefore, is this. Manet’s *Le Chemin de Fer* was painted in 1873. Steam is its subject, clearly; and how people relate to steam, how they face it or do not face it; how they turn to face *us*. Steam is certainly a metaphor in the Manet for a general, maybe constitutive, instability – for things in modernity constantly changing their shape, hurrying forward, dispersing and growing impalpable. And the picture is perfectly conscious of the fact that all this – this offer of constant mobility, and the feeling of everything passing by like lantern slides in a diorama – is deeply appealing. It is a sight for sore eyes. We all like watching the trains go by. But steam in the Manet is also a metaphor for that shifting and impalpability getting into the texture of life. Steam is a metaphor for appearance, and appearances here being transitory and for some reason also thoroughly guarded. Steam is the surface that life as a whole is becoming. The girl and the governess are put in a space that is more like a cage than anything else. From the railings to the picture plane there are only a couple of feet.

Steam and appearance, then – that is certainly Manet’s ruling metaphor. But not simply appearance *canceling* depth, and ruling out inwardness altogether. Manet and modernism never go that far. The governess is reading and dreaming. For a moment she is all outwardness and facingness, but she still has two fingers keeping her place in her novel. Maybe steam could also be a metaphor for the freedom of the imagination. But then we look again at those implacable railings, dividing and pressing the rectangle, pressing everything up to the picture’s surface. Surfaces are too easily *organized*, that is the trouble with modern mobility and anonymity. Always in the new city freedom (evanescence) is the other side of frozenness and constraint.

The Manet is the proper foil for the Oursler. I think. I want to leave the images side by side on the screen for a while, and step back and explain a little more generally what I am trying to do.

Back in mid-summer of this year, when Manuel Borja-Villel wrote to ask me to give the closing lecture of the present series, the terms of his invitation were cast very broadly. “Our main interest would be,” he said in his letter, “that you could establish a link between contemporary art and the history of art [in the twentieth century], and we are thinking of the same title as your book, *The Painting of Modern Life*.” It was an interesting challenge, and a difficult one. I am no expert on contemporary art. I am conscious of living, deliberately, in a modernist past, and of feeling a depth of identification with modernist artworks that has made it hard for me to give much of the art of the last twenty years its due. I should admit to a level of continuing anger at the caricature of modernism that has so often passed for characterization in the same period. Obviously, new movements need to take a distance from their forebears. Killing the father is a fact of artistic life. But killing a cardboard replica of the father, which bears as much resemblance to the real father as a wooden hobbyhorse to a horse – this seems to me utterly futile, and a guarantee of bad, self-righteous, simplistic work. I believe we need to understand modernism, in other words, if we are ever genuinely to get out from its shadow. My book *Farewell to an Idea* was an effort at beginning that real (as opposed to phony) process of saying goodbye.

So inevitably, as the director’s letter suggested, a large part of this lecture will be devoted to thinking again about what modernism was. But I do want to make the link with the present. I want to talk about the nature of modernism with always the question in mind: “If this was modernism, then what would escaping from it to another paradigm of artistic production be like?” Are we in the process of such an escape? In particular – and this I took to be the central challenge issued by Borja-Villel’s letter – if I take modernism to be a form of art somehow deeply attuned to certain facts and possibilities of modern life (of the form of life called modernity) then do I not think that the life we are living now is sufficiently different from that lived by Manet or Picasso or Jackson Pollock to *deserve* a new description – even if I may think it has not yet got one? Maybe just putting a *post-* on the front of modernism is inadequate, but would I not agree that modernity has been reconfigured in the last thirty or forty years? Reconfigured to the point of becoming something else...

And is not part of that reconfiguration a new form of visually spreading like a virus through the culture at large – a new machinery of visualization, a tipping of the social balance from a previous regime of the word to a present regime of the image? Surely that circumstance offers visual *art* a special opportunity? Is it not uniquely placed to enter into dialogue with what has now emerged as the central means of production of a newly imagined life? Or will what looks to be a unique opportunity turn out to be exactly the problem? Will the closeness of visual art to the actual present instrumentation of power – the current means of production of subjects – turn out to be not closeness but identity? Is not visual art in the process of becoming simply and irrevocably *part of* the apparatus of image-life production? Is not this the real sense of the much-noticed fact (a flip through the

pages of *Parkett or Artforum* confirms the fact, relentlessly, monotonously) that the one of demarcation between visual art and the fashion industry, for example, simply does not exist any longer? Not only does it not exist, but art glories in its non-existence. The non-existence is one of art’s great present themes.

Do not mistake me here. I do not intend to posit a modernism, in contrast to the present situation, that stood at a safe critical distance from the image-regimes that truly had power in the culture at large. Modernism always stood in close, dangerous proximity to the realm of appearances it fed on. Of course the Manet speaks to that, modernism’s motto was the great phrase from the young Marx’s critique of Hegel: modernists believed it was necessary for any art, any realism, to take the forms of the present deeply inside itself, at the risk of mimicry almost ventriloquism; but that out of that might come the possibility of critique, of true destabilization – they would “teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song.”

I think the question of this lecture is whether such a possibility is still open to art. Obviously you will not get a crisp answer to it from me. I do not know enough to give one. Maybe none of us do. But at least I think I have an idea of what is involved in *asking* the question. If what we want is to know whether the art of the present day might still be able to “teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song,” then surely we need to have ideas about what is truly petrified and petrifying in the current world of image-production and symbol-management. “Petrified,” on the face of it, seems a strange word to apply to what we are living through. The image-world seems not to be turning its objects, or even its users and viewers, to stone, but rather into water, or vapor, or pure spatiality, pure vitality. I promise to come back to this in the end. But it seems to me that we need to ask another question first. If we think the task of art is to unlock the utopian potential in our current forms of life – to pull them away from their present freezing and derealizing of potentialities “by singing them their own song” – then we have to know what “singing them their own song” might involve. What is the difference between dead mimicry and live (uncanny) “giving voice”? And here is where modernism is most important to us. For of course we cannot ask that question in the abstract. We can only ask it of modernism, which is the example we have of an art setting itself such a task. What did modernism think was involved in “singing [the petrified forms] their own song”? It is *singing* that Marx talks about, not saying, not writing out prosaically. Singing is an aesthetic act. How exactly did the modernists sing? In what key? With what “emancipation of the dissonance”?

I shall start again from the Manet, but try now to make the components of its modernism vivid by putting alongside it other strong images that stand, I hope, for modernism as a whole. Let me begin with the obvious, the indisputable. Modernism, so everyone roughly agrees, was a kind of formalism. Modernists put a peculiar stress on the physical, technical facts of the medium they were working in. They wished a painting to relish – and not just to relish,

to reiterate – the fact of the painting's flatness, the fact of its handmade-ness, the fact of its being a jigsaw of flat pieces locked into position on the plane. Both the Manet and the Malevich speak to that. Their means of ordering are explicit, almost schematic. The black bars or the splitting of the bodies' more vertical segments are meant to dramatize the picture's breakup of the world into formal elements or particles. The picture has to look, at least partly, like a compositional machine.

But already, as I begin to describe the particular nature of modernism's formalism, we are face to face with the other side of the equation. I said that modernists put a peculiar stress on the facts of the medium. But surely the accent here should fall on "stress" and on the stress's being so often deeply "peculiar." Modernism is the form formalism took in conditions of modernity – the form formalism took as it tried to devise an answer to modernity. And that form was stressed and aberrant. Either formal order was foregrounded – one might say fetishized – to the point that it registered as positively an imposition, a prefabrication, a set of machine-made templates. Or form was dispersed – pushed toward the point of emptiness or mere random juxtaposition – discovered always on the verge of incompetence or arbitrariness. Form in modernism sneeringly existed at the intersection of pure repetition and pure difference. Form and monotony went together. Or form and undifferentiating. Form and infantilism, form and undisciplined scrawling. Form had somehow to be a figure of the two great principles that gave modernity form – on the one hand the reality of machine regularity and uniformity, on the other the reality of randomness and evacuation. You could say of the purest products of modernism (and, for all their difference of mode, the Manet and the Stella seem to me comparable in this) that in them an excess of order interacts with an excess of contingency. And that this formal principia is thought to speak to something deep in the lived texture of modernity as a whole. *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, as one of Stella's titles from this moment has it.

Form in modernism, I am saying, was discovered time and again – typically, seemingly necessarily – in some sort of extreme state or limit condition. Formalism was extremism: that seems to me the fact about modernism that still needs explaining. My explanation is as follows.

Modernism was an approach to modernity. It was interested in the images and occasions of modern life, at least part of the time, but also, more deeply, in modernity's means of representation – the deep structure of symbolic production and reproduction within it. Somewhere at the heart of that symbolic order lay two great dreams, or two *great* offers. The first proposed that the world was becoming modern because it was turning into a space inhabited by free individual subjects, each dwelling in sensuous immediacy. The world was becoming a pattern of privacies – of appetites, possessions, accumulations. And these appetites were enough to make a world. In the realm of economy, they gave rise to markets. In the realm of experience, they gave rise to recreation – to life as a series of spectacles and games. Malevich's space-suited sportsmen are only a professionalization,

as it were, of the little girl's distraction and dreaming. This is the first dream of modernity. The second, in practice, was hard to separate entirely from the first. The world, it said, is more and more a realm of technical rationality, made available and comprehensible to individual subjects by being made mechanized and standardized. The world is on its way to absolute material lucidity. In the end it will become (and if you look hard, it is already becoming) a world of relations not entities, exchanges not objects, symbol management not bodies engaged in physical labor or gross struggle with the realm of necessity.

These were the central dreams of modernity, it seems to me. And of course modernist artists shared them – they were not somehow immune to their magic. But in practice – this is the key point – they found themselves putting these dreams, or patterns of imagery, to the test. And the test was form, the test of exemplification in a particular medium.

Modernism was a kind of wind tunnel, in which modernity and its modes were pushed deliberately to breaking point. For "pushing," in the case of painting read "flattening." How do the values and excitements called "modernity" look (this is Manet's question, this is modernism's question) when they are put down in two dimensions. Painting in modernism was a means of investigation: it was a way of discovering what the dreams of modernity really amounted to, by *finding* what it took to make a painting of them – what kind of play between flatness and depth, what kind of stress on the picture's shape and limits, what sorts of painterly insistence or abbreviation? And if these are the means we need to give such and such an ideal of modernity form, then what does this tell us about the ideal? Does the available imagery of the modern pass the test of representation? If I draw it, does it survive?

Of course, putting the problem in the way I have just done ends up making modernism seem too detached, too reasonable. In practice there seems to have been something about the dreams of modernity that drove modernism mad. The dreams were put to the test by being materialized, by being reduced to a set of actual, technical maneuvers; but time and again they were forced and denatured in the process, as if the artist wanted to see how much of the dream would survive the extremes of dispersal and emptying, flattening and abstraction, estrangement and de-skilling – the procedures that strangely, in modernism, *became what materialization was*. Modernist formalism was *forcing*, in other words; and I can see no explanation for that forcing, that continual extremism, except that it was a response to some extremity in the thing – the life – being tested.

Once upon a time I called this forcing of means and push to the limits in modernism its "practices of negation." But I do not like that formulation any longer. I think it is wrong to opt for either "negative" or "positive," or beautiful or ugly, as descriptions of modernism in characteristic mood. The point is that modernism is always on the lookout for the moment, or practice, to which both descriptions apply. Positive and negative, fullness

and emptiness, totalization and fragmentation, sophistication and infantilism, euphoria and desperation, an assertion of infinite power and possibility or a mimicry of deep aimlessness and loss of bearings. For this, I think, is modernism's root proposal about its world: that the experience of modernity is precisely the experience of the *two* states, the two tonalities, at the same time. Modernism is that art which continually discovers coherence and intensity in tentativeness and schematism, or blankness lurking on the other side of sensuousness. And not on the other side, really – blankness as the form that sensuousness and controlled vivacity now actually take on.

I think I can make this point, and other main points about modernism, clearer by looking a bit more closely at the Picasso. I realize that with the Picasso we are moving away from Manet's territory, which is always public and factual, even when the action takes place indoors, into a space much more reminiscent of Tony Oursler's *Influence Machine*. But that is as it should be. Of course modernism also very often turned to the ghastly and ghostly as its subject-matter. We know that already from the poem by W. B. Yeats. It just had a different view from Oursler's about what the fantasmatic consisted of, and where it might be located – how close to the imagining subject the apparition might be.

The Picasso hangs now in the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and is called *Figure* – meaning, as you know, in French, *figure* as a whole, but also specifically *face*.

The painting is not dated, but it must be from 1927, or possibly 1928. It measures 39 by 32 inches. My slide of the Pompidou painting is accurate about color. The figure is mainly monochrome. But there is a small amount of yellow introduced into the strange and beautiful upright strip at the right hand side of the canvas – the strip is a device, or reality, which is crucial to the picture's overall effect. It spatializes the terrible blank white aperture in the painting's centre, out of which the *figure* or *face* erupts. That is to say, it puts it somewhere in what appears to be a sequence of spaces – not, of course, that the sequence ever settles down into one plausible order. It is the quadrilateral to be understood, for instance, as floating forward from the yellowed strip at right, as if it were the surface of a window, hit by light, through which the *face* was visible for an instant? Or is it somewhere back from the picture plane, back from the tangible strip at the side – in an outside of some sort – in the darkness and placelessness signaled so implacably by the gray surrounding the white? I suppose that even to talk, as I just did, about the *face* coming out of the white aperture is begging the question. Because the aperture is also the *face*. It is one of its possible shapes or identities, and maybe the strongest. And yet the illusion of the *face* looking through some transparency, from a gray beyond, is also stubborn. The distance from viewer to image keeps changing as we look.

Some of you may have been saying to yourselves, listening to the story I am telling about the Picasso, that it is one you have heard many times before. And you are right. The kinds of

shifting and undecidability I have been pointing to in the Pompidou *Figure* are the ABC of modernism. *Figure* is giving them a basic grammatical outing. It has a pedagogical tone. Its black and white is that of the blackboard or the diagram. It is pedagogical, schematic, and therefore, I believe – this is another typical fact about modernism – deeply intertextual. The painting is obviously haunted by Picasso's own previous versions of geometry and monochrome, and seems to be asking itself the question: What, if anything, is left from the series of experiments called Cubism? Is this what Cubism now comes down to? This set of black and white *mechanisms*, in other words – this marriage of reason and squalor? But I do not think Cubism is the only previous pictorial grammar being invoked. I look again at the slightly yellowed vertical at the right hand side and find myself thinking, irresistibly, of the same vertical in Matisse's *Porte-Fenêtre à Collioure*. We cannot be sure, by the way, that Picasso would have seen this painting in 1927. But I think that conceptually it is the right pairing with *Figure*. Modernism, as I see it, is always debating whether anything – especially any human thing – can make an appearance again in the void of Matisse's 1914 black. And certainly Picasso knew enough of Matisse's version of Cubism to be fascinated with his rival's reduction of Cubist space making to this kind of system of verticals top to bottom. The great *Leçon de piano* had been shown for the first time in public the previous year, in October 1926, at Paul Guillome's gallery. Variants of the vertical strip organization crop up repeatedly in Picasso through the next two years or so. For instance, this *Head* from 1929. Or the *Figure and Profile* from the winter of 1928, which even has a sardonic Matisse type window at the left hand side complete with wrought-iron balcony rail. The *Figure* from the Pompidou is definitive for me – definitive of modernism, that is – partly because its dialogue with Matisse's proposals about paintings is so relentless, so schematic. And as so often with modernism, it is not clear what the effect or result of Picasso's reduction and schematization might be. It is homage to Matisse or negation of him? We should not opt too quickly for the latter. Black and white is not necessarily the opposite of colored. Matisse himself demonstrates that. And the face at the window of Picasso is not to be placed unequivocally in an anti-Matisse realm of un-pleasure, say, or monstrosity. There is a strange dialogue going on in *Figure* not only with Matisse's stock tokens of beauty and availability but also with Picasso's own. I see the extraordinary lithograph Picasso made in 1928 as in a sense a reply to the painting the year before. Not only, obviously, in its allowing back the tokens of charm and individuality; but in its reflection on how much of curvature and solidity could be reintroduced inside the confining rectangle and, most of all, in the way the rectangle, floating as it is in the white void of the paper, still acts as the shape of the head as well as a frame the head peeps through – and a frame that is ultimately confining as well as protective, a Procrustean cut-off as much as a possible ideal contour.

I chose Picasso's *Figure* as my second exemplar of modernism, alongside Manet's *Chemin de Fer*, partly because the Picasso was so clearly pushing the machinery of visualization to the limits. It is extreme and rebarbative, even by Picasso's standards, and you will have

gathered by now that extremity and extremism are basic to my sense of what modernism was about. Modernism, in practice, was some form of agony or anomie. And Manet, too, was perfectly capable of bringing that agony up front. Often in a Manet you begin to realize that the first casualness and mobility masks some kind of loss or horror. Your eyes move off left to the woman whose body is cut by the frame; the lean of her body, and desolation of her look, insinuate themselves as the keys to the picture's whole tone. The face is all the more agonized for being cut, for being almost absorbed into the gaudy flow of the spectacle.

Modernism was about some form of agony, I said; but the point is that the agony, in modernity, is not separable from delight. That is true of the Manet, but also true, I would argue, of the Picasso. This is why Picasso's effort at an imagery of horror is bound up with a pictorial dialogue with Matisse. I'll show you that horror *is* beauty, under modern conditions – that seems to me what Picasso is saying. And it was not as if Matisse simply disagreed with this, or failed to see what Picasso's art meant. Certainly horror and agony are never the right words in Matisse's case. He wanted to go on believing in the dream of appetite and sensation and pleasure. Of course – but in practice he too knew that the machinery of pleasure and possession was just that, a machinery; and that time and again what the machinery churned out was a vision of plenitude on the verge of stridency and overkill.

I think it is time I began to sum up. I could almost leave these two images up on the screen as I do so, but they are, on their own, too private, too immediate, too refusing of history to be able to stand for modernism as I conceive it. They are one moment of modernism – the inward-turning moment, the retreat to form as ultimately a shelter from modernity – though always, in the art that matters, modernity returns. No one is denying that this moment is integral to modernism, and is responsible for many of its highest achievements. But it is a moment. On the other side of the isolated and fantasmatic in modernism is always the dream of the figure taking its place in space again. Against Picasso's terrible eternal present there is *always* de Chirico's dream of history. So these are the images of modernism I shall end with: Malevich painting sometime during the terrible years of forced collectivization around 1930, and de Chirico again taking the measure of the world in 1914. This, by the way, is specifically the *Nostalgia of the Infinite* I referred to earlier on. I see these images as modernism facing the world – of course, in both cases, facing it in a profoundly strange way.

What do I think was modernism's subject, then? What was it about? Well, you can guess my starting point. It was about steam – in both the Malevich and the de Chirico a train still rushes across the landscape. It was about change and power and contingency, in other words, but also control, compression, and captivity – an absurd or oppressive orderliness is haunting the bright new fields and the sunlit squares with their eternally flapping flags.

Modernism presented us with a world becoming a realm of appearances – fragments, patchwork quilts of color, dream-tableaux made out of disconnected phantasms. But this is still happening modernism, *and* still resisted as it is described. These two pictures are still shot through, it seems to me, with the effort to answer back to the flattening and derealizing – with the effort to put the fragments back into some sort of order. Modernism is agonized, but its agony is not separable from weird levity or whimsy. Pleasure and horror go together in it. Malevich may be desperate, or he may be euphoric. He may be pouring scorn on the idea of collective man, or spelling the idea out with utter childish optimism. We shall never know his real opinions. His *picture* entertains both.

Modernism was certainly about the pathos of dream and desire in modern circumstances, but, again, the desires are unstoppable, ineradicable. The upright man will not let go of the future. The infinite still exists at the top of the tower. Even in the Picasso the monster flashing up outside the window is *my* monster, *my* phantasm, the figure of my un-negotiable desire. The monster is me – the terrible desiring and fearing subject inside me that eludes all form of conditioning, all the barrage of instructions about what it should want and who it should be. This is Picasso's vestigial utopianism. The fiat profile in the mirror at left is the recognizable "Picasso," the inhabitant of the twentieth century. But the *real* Picasso is the head in the center of things, with jaws wide open ready to devour its simulacrum. The real Picasso is the monster he makes. You think that modernity is a realm of appetite and immediacy! I'll show you appetite! I'll show you immediacy! I shall, as a modernist, make the dreams of modernity come true.

Modernism was testing, as I said before. It was a kind of internal exile, a retreat into the territory of form; but form was ultimately a crucible, an act of aggression, an abyss into which all the comfortable "givens" of the culture were sucked and then spat out.

I think the Picasso, and the idea of modernism as testing, can bring us finally back to the present. I want to put the Tony Oursler apparition opposite the Picasso (which I realize is unfair), and try to conclude – try to respond to Manuel Borja-Ville's request that I "establish a link between contemporary art and the art history" of the past one-hundred years. Let me say again what I said toward the start. I do not know the art of the present well enough to be able to ask questions of it with any authority; but I think I know modernism well enough to know what questions ought to be asked. I have been arguing that modernism wished to understand, and put under real pressure, the deep structure of belief of its own historical moment – those things about itself that modernity most took for granted, or most wished were true. The pressure was formal. The beliefs would survive the test of the medium, or they would disintegrate. Mostly it seems they disintegrated. Modernism was modernity's official opposition. It was the pessimist to modernity's eternal optimism. It cultivated extremism, it seems as an answer to modern life's pragmatism and technicality. Technique in modernism was not problem solving. It made problems worse.

The question to put to the art of the present, then, is what does that art see as the beliefs in the culture of our own moment that are similarly structural, similarly the core of our present ideology; and how does art envisage putting those beliefs to the test? I have talked somewhat generally about “beliefs,” but of course for visual artists it is beliefs about vision and visualization that count, or, rather, beliefs that take the form of images, of modes of visibility or dreams of knowledge taking specifically visual form. We all know that such beliefs are at present the cutting edge of a new myth of modernization. Oursler is typical here. Any artist with smarts is going to see that the dream life that currently matters is the dream life of the Worldwide Web. But how is that dream life going to be put under real pressure? We are back to the problem implied by Marx: “Teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song.” Mimicry is not enough. Nor is hectoring from the outside. It has to be *singing*. But singing involves hitting the right note, being exactly on key. It involves not an approximate knowledge of what the age of the digital believes about itself, but an intuition (*of the kind that Manet and de Chirico manage*) of precisely the central knot in the dream life – the founding assumption, the true *structure* of dream-visualization. It is easy to fake modernity’s uncanny. Modernity, as Benjamin reminds us, has thrived from the very beginning on a cheap spectacle of the strange, the new, the phantasmagoric. But modernity also truly dreams. The art that survives is the art that lays hold of the primary process, not the surface image-flow.

I see two belief systems that the art of our time may already be grappling with. One is simply the imagery of “information,” and the idea of the world being newly robbed of its space-time materiality by a truly global, truly totalizing apparatus of virtualization. The world in the hands of the symbol-managers, if you wish to put a pessimistic spin on it; or the world laid open to the digital multitude, the great global community of hybrids and particulars, if you wish to buy into the utopia proposed lately by Antonio Negri. This is belief system one. You will see that it is, among other things, a belief about a new form of knowledge – a new means of materialization and dematerialization of labor. And at the center of the belief system is an image of knowledge *visualized*, taking place in screen space, and being altered in its very structure by that new placing and mobilizing, that new system of appearances. This leads straight to belief number two. It is simply the belief that some kind of threshold is being passed, or maybe has been passed, from a bygone world where the Word was the ultimate structure of knowing to one ruled by the image or the shifting visual array.

This is the belief system, obviously, that visual artists will feel it hardest to disagree with or get a distance from. Just as Manet, with one side of himself, fell for the notion of capitalism as a pure realm of appearance. Present-day visual artists can hardly avoid the glamour of the notion that the verbal is over and the visual has replaced *it*. But just as Manet *in practice* discovered that the realm of appearances was also a realm of identities, fixities, constraints, and determinations, I dare to predict that once the present ecstasy of the virtual and

non-verbal is put to the test of *form*, *it* too will be found wanting. And I shall stop pretending to be neutral and say *why*. I shall end by offering artists of the present a few anti-visual, anti-digital slogans. Maybe you should imagine them as coming in a torrent out of the mouth of Tony Oursler’s ghost.

Nothing could be further from the truth, says the ghost in the *Influence Machine*, than the idea that the age of the Word is finished. On the contrary, the word is still everywhere. And the image *machinery* we have created and disseminated is just a means for making words layer into images – that is the trouble with it. The ghost abominates the current means of visualization in the culture not out of nostalgic “logo centrism,” but because it sees our present means of symbolic production as essentially flooding the world *with words* – with words (banal, transparent, immediate concepts) given sufficient visual form. Sufficient, that is, for words to make their hit, name their product, push the right paranoid button. Everything about the actual form of image-making speaks to that fact. The system’s notions of image clarity, of image flow and image density – they are all essentially modeled on the parallel (and unimpeded) movements of the logo, the compressed pseudo-narrative of the TV commercial, the product slogan, the sound bite. Images are still everywhere telling stories or issuing orders. Web pages, billboards, and video games are just visualizations – magnifications and speed-ups – of this prior and continuing world of the word.

The ghost rants on, I realize. *But* remember he is suffering – he has a real axe to grind. At least in his bitterness he points to a complex of problems, which, for the moment, our culture wishes not to recognize. If there is to be a visual art of postmodernity, I think I will have to begin from the ghost’s anger, the ghost’s skepticism. It will have to probe, as Manet and Picasso did, at the concepts that truly organize, that produce, our present fictions of the now. Once upon a time it was mobility, and free play of appearances, and the great myth of individuality. Those were Manet’s and Picasso’s raw materials. Nowadays it is the twin notions of virtuality and visibility. It is time these notions were put to test form.

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In 2000, T. J. Clark was invited to give a lecture at MACBA in the context of the course *Modernities*. This lecture was entitled 'The Painting of Postmodern Life?'

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