

Modernism Notes Nick Campion

My cue for this week is Ann Geneva. Following her argument that 'it is first necessary to locate astrology within its own universe of discourse before historians can attempt to compare it with other explanatory systems', we may be concerned to investigate astrology's contemporary 'universe of discourse'.¹

We need to understand two interlocking concepts:

1. Modernism: a forward-looking movement in art which originated in the late nineteenth century seeks a conscious break with the past, a rejection of the natural world, romanticism and excessive decoration, the use of simple design, abstraction and technology.

See the web site for the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition on Modernism in London in 2006

http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331_modernism/home.html

Modernism, by dismissing all previous truths and world views, tends to find itself in the position of supporting single truths. In this sense, science is regarded by some as the only reliable means of establishing truth and all other ways of knowing are condemned as irrational or superstitious. In modernist rhetoric, nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of progress. However, this does not mean that forms of 'irrationality; or 'superstition' cannot have their own modernist forms.

Dominant modernist cosmology is Newtonian in the sense that the entire universe is thought to be subject to a single set of natural laws. The Universe is therefore thought to be predictable and knowable through science and reason. However, this argument has completely failed to take into account the chaotic character of modernism in art, in which dreams, the unconscious, and spirituality are the driving force.

What both scientific and artistic modernists share is a utopian belief in the creation of a new, better, world. I would argue that this is therefore the core definition of modernism.

2. Modernity: the period in history characterised by rapid advances in technology, secularisation, urbanisation and democracy.

Hence:

Pre-modern: the period in Europe up to the seventeenth century.

Early modern: the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe

Late modernity: the period in the late twentieth century in Europe characterised by a loss of faith in the modern

¹ Geneva, Ann, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 1995, p. xiv.

The relationships, though, are complex: modernism as a cultural movement is a feature of modernity, but modernity, as a historical period, may include a great deal which is not modernist. Can Modernism, even if it espouses the notion of the single truth, include, as a broad phenomenon, multiple truths?

For example, for modernists who believe in secularism and science, Enlightenment values and the 'Enlightenment Project', which aimed at 'emancipation from myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature through the progressive operations of a critical reason',² is vital. However, one influential artistic modernist, Wassily Kandinsky, the founder of abstract painting, was a theosophist, while another, Andre Breton, the founder of Surrealism, was an astrologer.

Characteristics

There is no single definition of modernism. We can, through identify the following characteristics:

The belief in the creation of a new, better world.

Rejects tradition.

Assumes single truth (monist) and a 'grand', or 'metanarrative' in history (e.g., progress; evolution).

The search for the 'real'. The belief that the real can be objectively described (NB is this *really* modern?)

centered reality with non-arbitrary relationships.³

historically emerged from the Enlightenment

promises individuals "freedom, equality, justice, the good life, prosperity," and emancipation from ignorance.⁴

Often assumed to be secular, materialistic, scientific, positivist.

Origins: (1) late 19th c (2) post-WWI, 1918.

'Somerville (1947) and Toynbee suggested the concept of a 'post-Modern age, beginning in 1875, to delineate a forth stage of Western History after the Dark Ages (675-1075), the Middle Ages (1075-1475), and the Modern (1475-1875)'.⁵

But remember we have to distinguish Modernism as the ideological programme designed to create a new world from Modernity, the condition of the modern world (i.e., urbanism, industrialisation, materialism)

There may be a problem with the understanding of modernism: it has become an 'other', an 'outsider' for post-modernists, one that they can use in order to define themselves.

Modernism may have been caricatured and over-simplified as modernist, positivist and so on, and the spiritual, anarchic elements have been ignored because they don't suit the stereotype.

2 Docherty, Thomas *Postmodernism: A Reader*

3 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 19.

4 Bloland, Harland G, 'Postmodernism and Higher Education,' *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 66, No. 5. (Sept. - Oct., 1995): 523.

5 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, New York, Guilford Press, 1991. p.6

If the definition of modernism changes then some of the distinguishing features of post-modernism and its claim to special revelations may disappear.

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'Tony Blair insisted yesterday that the national identify card scheme should go ahead as a question of "modernity", not civil liberties'.⁶

'He (Tony Blair) added: "We have a modern world that we are living in that has new and different types of crime'.⁷

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Structuralism

Structuralism attempted to synthesize the Marxist concept that the truth of human existence could be understood by an analysis of economic structures' with Freudian theory which attempted to describe the underlying components of the psyche through the unconscious; and the linguistic construct of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

'structuralists attempted to build a rigorous, objective, scientific analysis of social life through the discovery of the underlying, deep structural and social rules that organize language and social systems'.⁸

Structuralists were known for "deploy[ing] holistic analyses that analyzed phenomena in terms of parts and wholes, defining a structure as the interrelation of parts within a common system. ...Structural analysis focused on the underlying rules which organized phenomena..."⁹

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Modernism and Science

Modernism 'requires faith that there are universals that can be discovered through reason, that science and the scientific method are superior means for arriving at truth and reality, and that language describes and can be used as a credible and reliable means of access to that reality.... Modernist science claims to be progressing toward true knowledge of the universe...'¹⁰

The sciences experienced innovation: physics with the Theory of Relativity; integration of the internal combustion engine; Darwinism and Freudian Theory; and the social theories of Marx, Comte, and Weber.

Modernism in Literature.

Modernist writers tended to see themselves as an avant-garde disengaged from bourgeois values, and disturbed their readers by adopting complex and difficult new forms and styles. In fiction, the accepted continuity of chronological development was

6 Travis, Alan, 'Blair dismisses civil rights argument against ID cards', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2006, p. 6.

7 Anon, 'ID cards "needed in modern world', *Metro*, 7 November 2006, p. 2.

8 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 18, 20.

9 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 18.

10 Bloland, Harland G, 'Postmodernism and Higher Education,' *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 66, No. 5. (Sept. - Oct., 1995): 523.

upset by Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner, while James Joyce and Virginia Woolf attempted new ways of tracing the flow of characters' thoughts in their stream-of-consciousness styles. In poetry, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot replaced the logical exposition of thoughts with collages of fragmentary images and complex allusions.....¹¹

‘Aesthetic modernity emerged in the new avant-garde modernist movements and bohemian subcultures, which rebelled against the alienating aspects of industrialization and rationalization, while seeking to transform culture and to find creative self-realization in art’.¹²

Composers such as Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) sought new musical forms combined with atonality and discordant sound. In the United States, Jazz and Ragtime also entered the music scene with its spiritual roots, syncopated rhythms and unusual articulation style. Parallel developments are noticeable in modern dance as it moved away from the classic rigors of ballet and into interpretive motion and theatrical context; and in architecture with its increasing abandonment of traditional conventions in favor of functionality, simple geometric shapes, and clean lines.

I would suggest the following two definitions:

Modernism I = authoritarian belief in single truth, aligned with positivism, scientism, atheism, materialism.

Modernism II = anarchic belief in multiple perspectives (even if with an underlying truth).

Modernist Astrology

How would we identify modernism in astrology?

Belief in the future?

The creation of new interpretative techniques?

A scientific, materialist ideology?

Belief that a new astrology is being created for a new world?:

Madame Blavatsky set the tone for theosophical attitudes to astrology when she stated that, Astrology is a science *as infallible* as astronomy itself, with the condition, however, that its interpreters must be equally infallible; and it is this condition, however, *sine qua non*, so very difficult of realization, that has always proved a stumbling block to both. Astrology is to exact astronomy what psychology is to exact physiology. In astrology one has to step beyond the visible world of matter, and enter into the domain of transcendent spirit (1877: 1.259).

Alan Leo

'I am actuated by the primary motive of expressing what I believe to be the true Astrology, for the new Era that is now dawning upon the world'.¹³

11 Baldick, Chris, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

12 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 2.

13 Leo, Alan (1925), *Esoteric Astrology: A Study in Human Nature*, London: Modern Astrology [1913], p. v.

Alan Leo's aim was to “modernise the ancient system of Astrology”.¹⁴

John Addey

‘astrology is evidently about to undergo a rebirth and a period of new growth. It will be no ordinary rebirth and no ordinary period of growth. From being an outcast from the fraternity of sciences, it seems destined to assume an almost central role in scientific thought’.¹⁵

Dennis Elwell

‘There is no area of knowledge, no activity, immune from the revolutionising effect of a genuine astrology...Astrology is the best...hope of religion, because it offers a meeting ground for the scientific and religious views of reality, reconciling many of their differences’.¹⁶

Jeff Mayo, former Principal of the Faculty of Astrological Studies, wrote that, Astrology as practised today by trained astrological-consultants is, by its correlation to modern psychology and the eradication of many muddle-headed esoteric theories and 'fortune-telling sensationalism', far removed from the astrology of even the turn of this century.¹⁷

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And I realize it is politically incorrect in astrology to say that the sidereal zodiac is wrong, but you can't have it both ways. To claim that both zodiacs "work" and are "correct" is a massive contradiction that negates any possibility that the signs have actual meanings that are discernable. And if the tropical zodiac is correct, then the whole sidereal notion of astrological "ages" is a fallacy supported by confirmation bias and selective reasoning. For more information on this topic, please see: <http://www.aaperry.com/index.asp?pgid=68>

Does newness constitute a form of modernism?:

‘I noticed to my amazement that European and American men and women coming to me for psychological advice were producing in their dreams and fantasies symbols similar to, and often identical with, the symbols found in the mystery religions of antiquity, in mythology, folklore, fairytales, and the apparently meaningless formulations of such esoteric cults as alchemy. Experience showed, moreover, that these symbols brought with them new energy and new life to the people to whom they came’.¹⁸

¹⁴ Curry, Patrick, *A Confusion of Prophets*, London: Collins & Brown, 1992.

¹⁵ Addey, John, *Astrology Reborn*, London: Faculty of Astrological Studies 1971. p. 3.

¹⁶ Elwell, Dennis, *Cosmic Loom: The New Science of Astrology*, London: Urania Trust, p. 3.

¹⁷ Mayo, Jeff (1981), *Teach Yourself Astrology*, London: Hodder and Stoughton [1964], p. 7.

¹⁸ Jung, C.G., *Psychology and Alchemy*, Translated by R.F.C. Hull, *Bollingen Series XX, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 12*, (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press: 1983),p.V

An extract from Nick's book:

The resurgence of interest in 'middling' horoscopic astrology in the early nineteenth-century focused initially on a rediscovery of the past. The icon was Claudius Ptolemy, whose naturalistic rationalism for astrology enabled its practitioners to present themselves both as the holders of last wisdom and in tune with the emerging scientific mood of the times. There was initially little thought of innovation, even when Zadkiel argued that astrology should be seen as scientific. But, then, his view that occult practices were themselves perfectly explicable was fully in line with the atmosphere in which many scientists supported psychical research. The point was to reveal the true nature of the world. A truly modern astrology had to wait for Alan Leo who, even though he saw himself as heir to an ancient tradition - he argued that astrology had been practiced for a hundred thousand years - and imported Indian spirituality, stripped technical astrology down to its essentials. His esoteric models were elaborate, with their notions of higher and lower planetary vibrations arranged in varying orders, but his method of reading horoscopes, shorn of all decoration, was the equivalent of the simplified music and architecture of his contemporaries Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951). It could be compared to the seminal abstract art of his fellow theosophist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the common theme between all four being a search for purity. Between them theosophists and Jungians, coming together in Dane Rudhyar continued to construct an astrology which was unambiguously modernist, both in its stylistic simplicity and its enthusiasm for the future. In terms of the development of astrology itself, Leo was the heir of the sixteenth-century reformers. While they, though, had failed to expunge all of what they called 'Arabic superstitions' from astrology, he succeeded. He reconciled those bitter seventeenth century rivals, Robert Fludd and Johannes Kepler, combining the former's extravagant Neoplatonic esotericism with the latter's paired down astrology. He retained the zodiac signs but, in other respects his technical astrology was Keplerian. New Age astrology as a whole, including its offshoots in the popular press, are the legacy of this early twentieth century cultural revolution. In one of its forms Modernism requires grand narratives, such as Marxist revolution or Darwinian evolution, in which the individual is subsumed within a greater whole. Leo provided an overarching purpose for astrology through Blavatsky's teachings on the individual's role in the spiritual evolution of the cosmos. Jung might have shifted the emphasis from cosmic evolution but he had an equal faith that astrology, as an adjunct to analytical psychology, should serve the purposes of historical change.

Astrology as opposed to Modernism

The Enlightenment took shape in the 17th Century when empirical knowledge and exploitation of natural materials became valuable to technological advancement. Once conventional view, held by astrology's supporters as well as critics, holds that the Enlightenment was diachronically converse to the vernacular of astrological reasoning. As Ann Geneva put it 'This taxonomic empirical norm was antithetical to

the universe on which astrology depended for its existence.'¹⁹ This view holds that intellectuals found that improvements in experiential paradigms threw up promising new ways of understanding and manipulating the natural world and in turn the new science began to develop it's own rational geometric language which, according to Ann Geneva, 'severed microcosm from macrocosm [and] eliminated astrology as a system of both language and explication.'²⁰ Increasingly, Astrology became vilified and ostracized by academic institutions because of its incompatibility with experiential methods (and religious doctrine). Subsequently, the development of natural philosophy constituted a belief that ultimate Truth could somehow be found in astrological method and verified by scientific research.

The consequences encompassed other areas of inquiry as well as attitudes to astrology. As Ninian Smart said of the psychology of religion, there is a sense that the purpose is to explain away the phenomena under consideration (Smart 1973: 37; see also Hill: 1973: 13-14). As a result, Stark continued, 'it is now impossible to do credible work in the social scientific study of religion based on the assumption that religiousness is a sign of stupidity, neurosis, poverty, ignorance, false consciousness, or that it represents a flight from modernity' (1999: 56-7).

However, the parallel labelling of astrology as deviant may be no more than a device to confirm what Glock and Stark (1966: 10-11) called the 'humanistic value-orientation' or what As Herbrechtsmeier (1993: 15) termed the 'imperial' attitudes of modern science. Thus the proposition that belief in astrology needs to be explained is itself the product of what Dean *et al.* described as systematic errors of human judgement (Dean, Kelly and Mather 1996b: 89-90).

Key modernists

Auguste Comte
Charles Darwin
Karl Marx
Mahler
Schoenberg
Schopenhauer
James Joyce
Pablo Picasso
Kandinsky
Matisse

Can we include H.P. Blavatsky in the above list? I would say we could. Most academics would say we can't. However, if theosophy was a vital influence (along with Freud) on modernist art, surely we should include the founder of the Theosophical Society?

19 Geneva, Ann, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995) p.281 [hereafter Geneva, Ann, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind*]

20 Geneva, Ann, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind*, p.281

