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Introduction: On the Market and Uneven Development

affirm: *v.tr.*

1. To declare positively or firmly; maintain to be true.

2. To support or uphold the validity of; confirm.

I

Modernism and modernity have now completed the second decade of a remarkable, some would have said unpredictable, revival of intellectual fortunes. Dating this revival from the inaugural issue of the flagship journal, *Modernism/modernity* in January 1994—a year which also saw the release of Christopher Butler's *Early Modernism*, Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*, and Art Berman's *Preface to Modernism*—we can safely maintain that, despite everything the increasingly sophisticated postmodern hypothesis then had to throw at it, modernism's cultural and artistic emanation, across a vast spectrum of isms and other movements, has not suffered an appreciable set-back since; whereas postmodernism now seems a spent conceptual force. Judging merely by the volume of publications with either term in their title, modernism now eclipses postmodernism as an object of inquiry by an order of ten to one. There are today numerous modernist-related scholarly book series, research centres, professional organizations, annual conferences, networks, associations, colloquia, discussion lists, and of course journals—spread across a planetary web—that did not exist even in the heyday of an orthodox academic Modernism associated with the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The so-called New Modernism Studies, no longer new but firmly established in a number of disciplines, has succeeded to the point that it sometimes feels as though postmodernism were a fever dream, a nightmare from which the dormant corpus of modernism has now awoken, refreshed, ready to resume its former responsibilities.

Affirmations joins the field with a brace of equivocations it would like to air in advance of its inaugural issue. The first of these equivocations, to be developed

at relative length below, concerns the supposed disappearance or obsolescence of the postmodern hypothesis itself, which we would prefer to see as having been sublated into the very methodological matrix of the New Modernism Studies—how else to account for so many of the concerns animating that initiative? The preoccupation with material culture; the obsession with motifs of celebrity, cultural capital, and mediation; the "race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class" axis of representational dynamics; visuality and aurality as active hermeneutic horizons; and the colonial distribution of international sites of modernist accumulation: what are these but so many extensions of the postmodern agenda, by other means? To say as much is to speculate that the New Modernism Studies is, to a certain extent, postmodern in its underlying commitments; less a return to the things themselves than an effort to use them to think laterally about the contemporary. In any event, this "Modernism" is different in kind from the variable emphases on organic form, *Verfremdungseffecte*, abstraction, and existentiality of an earlier moment.

Second, and contrapuntally, there is a strong sense of some not-quite-antiquarian historicism, a retreat from the intellectual rigours of understanding the present, in the systematic reclamation of 1922 as the Greenwich meridian of cultural-historical time. Where once the most engaged intellectual practice took root in a building built yesterday or a blockbuster current release, nowadays it would feel almost indecent to suppose that anything but journalism or "cultural studies" might grubby its hands with the indelicate commercial present. Safe behind the fortress of time, not unlike Joyce's *Ulysses* shielded from the First World War by aesthetic fiat, New Modernism Studies goes about its archival business in a vacuum-sealed bunker some safe distance beneath today's "desert of the real." This observation dovetails with the question posed by Fredric Jameson at about the time when the New Modernism Studies were being launched: "whether, if you prefer modernism, it is conceivable, let alone possible, to go back to the modern as such, after its dissolution into full postmodernity"?[1] Subsequent intellectual history may appear to have answered this rhetorical question

[1] Fredric Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?," *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern: 1983-1998* (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 87.

resoundingly in the affirmative[2]; but the deeper significance of the query lay in its abiding connection to a conceptual victory in the domain of periodization, where postmodernity was disclosed not merely as a set of optional stylistic fashions, but a profound modification of the social and economic "ground" itself. From that vantage point, the turn to modernism must look evasive at best, and reactionary at worst: an abandonment of engaged political analysis and evaluation pitched against the status quo, and a resigned, if reformist, accommodation with the recalibrated canon as such.

This double demur highlights a paradoxical situation in which the postmodern is both disavowed as a legitimate object, and yet simultaneously absorbed into the theoretical disposition of our redoubled attention to the modern. We exploit the texts, images, and sounds of modernity as so many distorted lenses for the scrutiny of our own inadmissible cultural landscape; the questions we pose to modernism belong properly to our own situation in late capitalism, and the cultural products of high capitalism answer back with ciphers and rebuses that fascinate all the more for their allegorical filigree. In order to make some provisional sense of this paradoxical and bemusing complex, we will want now to make a polemical case for the necessity of keeping alive and active the postmodern hypothesis as such; for it is only by so doing that the logic of this mostly disavowed contradiction in intellectual space can be raised to self-consciousness and developed into a dialectical mode of praxis. *Affirmations* is interested above all else in the chiasmic transference of energies between a modernist and a postmodernist "cultural dominant," and in the perseverance of that chiasmic form within the very cultural logic of late capitalism itself.

II

Perhaps the most opportune place to start is in the declaration of principle embedded in the finale of Jameson's *A Singular Modernity*; namely, the non-prescriptive advice to substitute "capitalism for modernity in all the contexts in

[2] And one may include here, with all due irony, the various sequels in Jameson's own work to the great moment of postmodern capture: *The Modernist Papers* (London & New York: Verso, 2007) and *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), to name but two sizable offerings.

which the latter appears."[3] One effect of that recommendation, in this particular context, is then immediately to foreclose any thought of modernity's literal "end" or overcoming in the postmodern, since Jameson's work more than anybody's has gone to great lengths to demonstrate the underlying continuities, within significant structural modification, of capitalism's long arc across the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Rather, what we begin to see is that capitalism's historical adventure in the social ambience of modernity describes both larger and larger circles of influence, and, relatedly, ever greater degrees of complexity, differentiation, and intensification in its modus operandi as a mode of production. To speak of "capitalism" rather than "modernity" in all the latter's applied contexts, is to accept that this conceptual "singularity" is internally differentiated and self-negated, both by the dynamic and contradictory development of what is now seen as an economic form rather than a cultural force-field, as well as by the distinct geographical and spatial inscriptions of that development in any number of determinate, concrete situations. And yet the point of Jameson's injunction was presumably to recommend the use of a core set of questions and conceptual motifs—a *problematic*, in the old Althusserian sense—that might be said to persist across all iterations of the capitalist mode of production, be it "national/industrial," "high/imperial," or "late/multinational." It is not for us to decide what, exactly, that abiding problematic may consist in (though with any luck the conceptual personae we know as "class struggle," "accumulation," "colonialism," and other old friends will be featured in the cast); instead, what seems more useful here is to identify which elements of the intellectual machinery elaborated to undertake the critique of capitalism shed the most revealing light on the "cultural logic of capitalism" as a whole.

To that end, we propose here to accentuate two particular critical concepts, in the hope that a proper consideration of their interrelations might engender new thought about the very social meaning of modernism and postmodernism as modes of aesthetic orientation. On the one hand, it seems more pertinent than ever to focus attention on the *market* as such—a neutral and inhuman matrix of infinite equivalence (Marx called it the "cash nexus"), in which all specific qualities are immediately liquidated by the spontaneous mathematical equations of their exchange values to those of all others. On the other, and in many senses

[3] Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 215.

militating against that plane of immanence, we make out the nonequivalent topography of *uneven development* itself: that spatial allegorization of historical lags and disjointedness, where the infinite grid of exchange is brought up short against variable rates of capitalization and the very limits of the market. One very useful way of thinking about capitalism is somehow to grasp it simultaneously as the appearance, from within the concrete practices of millions of men and women, of a computational plane of immanence where everything is transposed into a numerical value and thereby rendered equivalent with everything else (including the labour powers of those very men and women); and the intermittent occlusion of that abstract grid in sudden impasses generated by capitalist institutions and practices in concrete historical situations. Capitalism, that is to say, is at one and the same time a web of infinite equivalence, and the tearing of that web on unpredictable splinters and breaks in the social fabric, which it is obliged to move across by the law of accumulation.

What is interesting and useful about this double characterization, in all its unstable paradoxicality, is that it can serve as a frame with which to reconsider the "cultural logics" peculiar to this mode of production. In a first phase, the establishment of the market's plane of immanence throughout a matrix of universal equivalence fixes the epistemological exhilaration of realism itself; since this unique web of numerical egalitarianism (where all values confront one another as aliquot parts of the selfsame substance, the *Gallerte*[4]) breaks apart a gloomy world of immemorial caste distinctions and chauvinistic valuations with the piercing ray of rational enlightenment. The bourgeoisie's cultural revolution proceeds in the first instance by way of the remorselessly secular, comic energy of the market's implicitly universal *Aufklarung*, inaugurating a new set of coordinates for what is felt to be a "world" at all—"a new space and a new temporality, a whole new realm of measurability and Cartesian extension, as well as of measurable clock time, a realm of the infinite geometrical grid, of

[4] This is the highly metaphorical, satirical term that Marx used to characterize the "substance" of exchange value in *Das Kapital, vol. 1*: a kind of ground-up and gelatinous agglutination of all the concrete labour processes that, between them, go to establish the market value of labour-power itself. Keston Sutherland's ingenious recovery of this concept's specificity is a highlight of his *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011), 26-90.

homogeneity and equivalence."[5] The world market itself, characterized by "an elasticity, a capacity for sudden extension by leaps and bounds," is the unprecedented space of capital's self-expansion; a space of often violent transformation, colonization, and the ruthless conquest of new theatres of operation, but all in the name of an imperturbable logic of identity.[6] To be sure, once installed and extended outward in all directions (into the State bureaucracies, juridical law, the franchise, the natural sciences, and so on), the market's "cultural logic" meets any number of resistances, both internal and external. One privileged site of philosophical resistance, to which we will return later, is the collected writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom the holocaust of values and qualities internal to the market's rampant positivism is an index of the nihilism of modernity. That he does not express this as a matter of the market but of morality and science, does not diminish the intensity or insight of his critique of quantification and equalization:

> Might all quantities not be signs of quality? […] The reduction of all qualities to quantities is nonsense.
> […]
> But everything for which the word "knowledge" makes any sense refers to the domain of reckoning, weighing, measuring, to the domain of quantity; while, on he other hand, all our sensations of value (i.e., simply our sensations) adhere precisely to qualities, i.e. to our perspective "truths," which belong to us alone and can by no means be "known"! […] Qualities are an idiosyncrasy peculiar to man; to demand that our human interpretations and values should be universal and perhaps constitutive values is one of the hereditary madnesses of human pride.[7]

Nobody discerned as lucidly the nihilism implicit in modernity's wholesale conversion of "noble" human qualities and values into quantitative measurement and statistical homogeneity. Locating his own philosophical enterprise in the

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[5] Fredric Jameson, "The Realist Floor-Plan," in Marshall Blonsky, ed., *On Signs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 373.

[6] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 579.

[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Holingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 304-5.

very soil of that nihilism, Nietzsche declared the "eternal return" as "the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing (the 'meaningless'), eternally!" (36). The blind spot here was constitutive: the economy, of which Nietzsche remained steadfastly ignorant to the end. Applying the economic epithet to the condition in question really settles the theoretical compact with our "modern" history: *capitalist nihilism* emerges as the most urgent critical concept for any adequate confrontation with the cultures of modernity.

That is one way, in any event, of traversing the long historical arc from realism to postmodernism as "cultural dominants" of capitalism, since what had first appeared to be revolutionary and enlightening in the market's web of equivalences has ended up in our acute and enervating sense of its "meaningless" infinity. What for the nineteenth century was felt as cultural modernity's audacious, democratic inclusion of "any-space-whatever," as per Rancière's tireless insistence on the "aesthetic regime's" steely indifference towards traditional distinctions of value, is for us the extinction of any habitable existential frame of reference. Badiou's sober estimation of this limitless horizon of capitalist indifference as a situation of "worldlessness" bears repeating:

> In its structural aspect, this nihilism might be called the nihilism of virtual equality. [… T]here is an egalitarian dogmatism [in place], that of equality *vis-à-vis* the commodity. The same products are on sale everywhere. […] In principle, anybody and everybody is posited as being equal to everybody else, as being able to buy whatever is being sold as a matter of right.
> […]
> In its circumstantial aspect, capitalist nihilism has reached the stage of the non-existence of any world. Yes, today there is no world as such, only some singular and disjointed situations.[8]

The infinite grid of exchange and equivalence having descended into our most intimate phenomenological fibres, we are thereby cut adrift from any mooring in the "human" fold—which now appears, in retrospect, to have depended upon

[8] Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London & New York: Verso, 2006), 33-4.

some footing in pre- or non-capitalist worlds, worlds not yet fully colonized by the commodity form, but radiating relational qualities that Heidegger once associated with the "fourfold": earth, sky, gods, and mortals. Abandoned fully to the computational matrix of indifferent and virtual equality, we are nihilists not by conviction or avocation, but merely by disposition. "World" itself is annihilated by this viral contagion of market egalitarianism. Žižek glosses Badiou:

> The universality of capitalism resides in the fact that capitalism is not a name for a "civilization," for a specific cultural-symbolic world, but the name for a neutral economico-symbolic machine […]; it really is universal, a neutral matrix for social relations.[9]

It is clear how the postmodern hypothesis, as elaborated by Jameson and a number of others, should have arisen in direct response to this epochal situation of the final world-victory of the "neutral matrix" that had once, long ago, underwritten the prodigious cultural revolution of realism and the Enlightenment. It is also clear that what must therefore have especially characterized the intervallic paradigm of modernism, the "vanishing mediator" between realism and the postmodern, is uneven development itself; which is to say, that sense of symbolic, site-specific resistance to the market as a liquidator of sensory qualities. The difference between modernity so-called and postmodernity in this sense was clearly defined by Jameson's magisterial intervention: modernity (which Habermas rightly called an "unfinished project") is the experience of modernization when its implicit universality is *incomplete*, when there are still "hearts of darkness" unpenetrated by the commodity form, and still those rare metropolitan centres of exception where the modern could be felt in contradistinction to what it was not. Postmodernity is the grey hangover of the morning after, when modernization is over and done with, when all the "hearts of darkness" have been electrified and transformed into debtor nation-states, when high-rise architecture stretches from Kathmandu to Kinshasa, and the United Colours of Benetton decorate every airport. Modernity is what it feels like to be projecting boldly into the future, out of the cradle of the past, clearing away feudal cobwebs and traditional social forms, and establishing the cash

[9] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Harvard, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 318.

nexus in the far-flung places of the earth; postmodernity is how it feels when there's nothing left to clear away and every last square inch of social space is already snared in the universal webs of exchange.

The boldness of the postmodernism hypothesis was that it supposed there might be a meaningful correlation between this radical alteration in the lifeworld of capitalism, and the forms being taken by the cultural and artistic works situated within it. So, for instance, postmodernism would tend to be characterized by a new kind of exhilaration, tilting over into paranoia, about the sheer enormity of the world market today—the wheels within wheels within wheels that define multinational financial agreements, the dislocated production process, and the staggering number of products on offer. Postmodernism would be likely to under-privilege the individual human subject, with all her precious interiority, and prefer instead to accentuate the more generic, abstract, and piecemeal pragmatics of getting by as human agents today—risk society, flexible work schedules, the industrialization of desire, and the steady consumption of an identical cultural diet the world over. And postmodernism would, given all this shocking destabilization of the older coordinates of lived experience, probably shy away from any excessive investment in "feelings" or "emotions," too, since these were (a) likely to be traumatic in nature, and (b), if not, likely to be prefabricated by a culture industry keen to program the social majority in how, when, and what to feel. Postmodern aesthetics would thus be said to spring, "logically," from the uterus of social life itself, bearing the inevitable patterning of its economic DNA the way a zebra bears its stripes.

Modernism, on the other hand, could be said to have arisen from an acute sense of "uneven development." Specifically, in a social sense, this meant the simultaneous existence of (a) a dominant bourgeois civil society; (b) a strong residual aristocracy (in all the European nation states); (c) a powerful awareness of distinct and "traditional" ways of life in the various colonies and pre-capitalist zones; and (d) a vocal and significant socialist alternative.[10] This was most typically "felt" by artists and writers in clusters of powerful psychological attractions and repulsions: for the bourgeoisie, and for the market itself,

[10] See Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," *New Left Review* (I) 144 (March-April 1984): 96-113.

modernists felt nothing but contempt, but their machine culture, the wonderful inventions, technologies, and communications of the middle class, cast an aesthetic spell over them, positively or negatively; for the aristocracy, there was a good deal of respect in many quarters, for the lofty and financially indifferent arrogance of a tower, a manor, or a name, but this was tempered by the loathed "academicism" that was the redoubt of traditional ruling-class culture, against which all of the modernisms railed in turn. For pre-capitalist tribal society, the moderns evinced an intermittent totemic fascination, tempered by revulsion, as can be seen in Gaughin, Conrad, Picasso, Breton, Bataille, and many others. And as for the socialist movement, whether they felt it negatively (as Yeats or Wyndham Lewis) or affirmatively (as Brecht, Rodchenko, or Mayakovsky), the modernists registered it precisely as the possibility of a non-capitalist future: something new and unknown, but out from under the heels of the market. In a word, modernism has often been defined as the cultural logic of modernity, but only if you accept the proviso that it never openly *identifies* with capitalist social relations or the market as such. Modernism was a curious kind of commitment to modernity—not to its central project (the establishment of a global market), but to the *difference* that project made to the world around it. What it expressed was the messy and contradictory stage of modernization in a mixed or unfinished state: the uncanny overlaps in lived experience between rural and urban, metropolitan and colonial, industrial and artisanal modes of life. Another way of putting this is to dwell on the sudden displacement, in Imperialism proper, of the core process of accumulation, its alienation to tropical zones in far-flung, never-visited places across the equatorial horizon. The suddenly imposed incapacity to "experience" the total production process as a lived series of practices, the irreversible shattering of the immanent national economic framework by way of colonial accumulation, meant that henceforth "life" itself—the existential humus out of which art emerges as a transfigurative gesture—was dislocated quite beyond the limits of the individual. Cultural and artistic practices thereby developed, within their complex *mappae mundi*, determinate sites of vacancy, sheer void, pockets of nothingness, to trace the negative imprint of those holes in the existential fabric of Imperial being.

There is of course a good deal of power in these causal, explanatory arguments about the general shape of aesthetic activity under the shadow of two distinct phases of market society; and yet, the underlying simplicity of the model at work

in them, which would best be described as a model of "homology," ought to be queried. Crudely put, the claim is that modernism "expresses" modernity's uneven developments, while postmodernism "expresses" postmodernity's universal web of market relations. Moreover, the stronger claim is that just as postmodernity displaces or supersedes modernity, so too the attendant aesthetic logic or mode of expression is displaced: postmodernism ousts modernism in an irreversible historical putsch. There are problems with this account and the model underlying it. It will suffice to mention two. In the first place, we must be uncomfortable with any argument that predicts form from function—as various critics have shown, all the postmodern traits or aesthetic features can be detected at work throughout the modernist period; and, as we would like to claim, modernist aesthetic acts are still being perpetrated today. No matter that these are, admittedly, minority acts: the point is that it is impermissible to make sweeping statements around an arbitrary line in the sand, before and after which all art and literature is either modern or postmodern. Secondly, there is something ontologically problematic about the either/or postulate built into the before and after model: before, modernization was incomplete, and afterward, it was complete—in which case you will either have modernism or postmodernism according to the point you are occupying on the temporal continuum. Sometime after the Second World War, modernity was "finished"—it ran out of places to go. In one of Jameson's more doubtful phrases, he writes:

> the postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace […]. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization.[11]

Would any of us wish to endorse this statement today? Even as polemical overstatement, it is poor stuff; but it is the logical result of forcing the issue between a "then" of modernism, when things were uneven, and residues still existed, and art was relatively "autonomous" from the market; and a "now" of postmodernism, when there is nothing but the continuous present and the blinking cursor of what Badiou calls "a perpetual instant of absence, of

[11] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 308-9.

purchasable enjoyment measured out in millimetres," when art cannot even pretend to autonomy because everything is immanent to the same neutral circuits of exchange.[12]

Most good radical historians and economists would prefer to say that the market cannot exist without creating unevenness and anachronisms, and that if it did, it would perish in an instant. That cannot be argued satisfactorily here, but let us for a minute suppose that everything had truly reached the same hour on the great clock of development: where would the profits come from? If all labour power cost the same? If all raw materials cost the same? If the symbolic capital of a start-up company in Lahore was the same as that of a start-up company in San Diego? If Cambodians had the same access to health care as Canadians, or if rationalism were as highly developed in Kolkata as it is in Chicago? The market thrives on such inequalities, and perpetuates them. Yes, without any doubt, the market's nihilism is more fully extended than at any point in history; it has truly saturated the planet; but it has done so unevenly, and in such a way that, rather than eliminating residues and archaic survivals, it keeps reinventing them.

We might feasibly mention just three of these. Once upon a time, the invention of typewriters, gramophones, photography, radio, and the cinema, presented a major threat to art as we knew it, and literature too. For centuries, literature and the fine arts had enjoyed a monopoly over the storage and dissemination of cultural information, but the newer machines could automatically store and disseminate much greater volumes of information, and without the need for any aesthetic education. Literature and the traditional arts rallied in defence of their own ways of communicating, in the so-called *système des beaux-arts*, and cried down the stupid impressionism of the new media (while secretly borrowing many of their techniques). The upshot was modernism itself: an aesthetic expression of the uneven development between manual and mechanical media.[13] Today, a rather different but roughly comparable situation presents itself. The mechanical media themselves have become obsolete in the face of the incredible successes of digital technology in doing what they did (namely, recording and

[12] Badiou, *Polemics*, 36.

[13] See Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

sharing images and sounds), better and more swiftly. But they too are rallying. These "residues" of an earlier phase of capitalist development haven't simply been swept away, though they are certainly imperilled: films shot on celluloid, records pressed on vinyl, voices transmitted electromagnetically through the air, have found small but vibrant places for themselves on the world market, and in many senses rather "against" the market, since more often than not the intention is not to turn a profit, but to stand up for "unevenness" itself, to resist the juggernaut of "convergence culture" where all culture will be stored on a single black box. My simple argument is that these are the conditions for something like "modernism" to take root in the small but discernible cracks in the postmodern edifice.

It will tend to do so especially where such media unevenness overlaps with a still more powerful kind of unevenness: namely, geographical uneven development. I have suggested that the nation states of the world system do not all occupy the same precise place on the world clock. For every ten stories about IMF bailout packages and vicious austerity drives, there is one that charms by its sheer "crazy" indifference to Jameson's "great clock of development." I think of Latin America in particular today, and specifically of a recent law passed in Bolivia granting to Mother Earth the same basic rights as all citizens; in particular, the rights to "life and regeneration, biodiversity, water, clean air, balance, and restoration." As the law states, "Mother earth is a living dynamic system made up of the undivided community of all living beings, who are all interconnected, interdependent and complementary."[14] This doesn't sound much like Milton Friedman. The effective authors of this law are indigenous and small-scale farmer communities: precisely those "remnants" of an older order of things who were supposed to have been "swept away" by the shock doctrine and Green Revolutions of the 1970s. Comparable structures of feeling in Venezuela and Cuba, and elsewhere in the region, suggest a much more dynamic picture of the world system than one of dreary sameness, and are doubtless one very powerful reason why Latin American literature remains such a potent source of modernist gestures and achievements—and we would especially like to nominate the late

[14] See the story by Nick Burton, "The Law of Mother Earth: Behind Bolivia's Historic Bill," in *Truthout*, http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/673:the-law-of-mother-earth-behind-bolivias-historic-bill. Accessed 28/6/2013.

Roberto Bolaño, whose two last novels will rank very high indeed, in the annals of world modernism, come Judgement Day.

Of a third, and rather novel sense of contemporary uneven development, it is enough to say that the key postmodern postulate of "post-industrialism" was only ever meant to refer to a landscape purged of all industrial traces, including the working class—a squeaky clean urban sprawl of reflective glass surfaces, the service sector, and computerization; it was certainly never meant to conjure up the epic industrial dereliction of present-day Detroit, or the vast, crumbling Eastern European rustbelt of post-Soviet factories. Where we will most likely continue to see modernist aesthetic sparks escaping the grids of equivalence is from the lived contradiction between different ex-urban zones lying cheek-by-jowl: one properly postmodern and gated, under the eye of CCTV, the other quietly decaying into lifeless fossils of the industrial age. For confirmation, we refer you to the images taken on digital camera by David Lynch of dead factories in Poland. These images are ample testimony to the extraordinary "modernist" possibilities of an aesthetic praxis situated today on the fault-line between, for instance, the industrial decomposition of Poland and the decadent sites of exhibition in the capitalist West. Slavoj Žižek remarks that the "postindustrial wasteland of the Second World is in effect the privileged 'evental site,' the symptomal point out of which one can undermine [aesthetically] the totality of today's global capitalism. We should love this world, even its gray decaying buildings and its sulphurous smell—all this stands for history, threatened with erasure."[15] Indeed; such uneven development remains a "privileged site" of modernist aesthetic resistance to the world wide web of capitalist nihilism.

Another problem with reserving all unevenness for the "modern" period proper, and the untrammelled marketplace for the "postmodern," is that it overlooks a parallel problem internal to modernism itself. Adorno's seminal statement on the dangerous game played by modern artworks, if they wanted to be truly modern, is germane. Accepting that the innermost impulse of all modernist art and literature was to protest against the overwhelming positivity of market relations, Adorno nevertheless specified that, in order to do so, the artwork had to borrow the form and vestment of the commodity form itself. "The absolute artwork

[15] Žižek, *Parallax View*, 159.

converges with the absolute commodity," he wrote. "Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent."[16] In that sense, resistance is not refusal, and in order to conjure away the spell of the commodity form from their own aura, artworks had to become dangerously like unto commodities themselves.

We have said that modernism consisted in an aesthetic expression of the gaps opened up between incompatible social worlds by the market, but by no means consisted in any open identification with the market itself. And yet, here in one of the most important theoretical positions on the matter, we find that modernism simply had to "identify" with the market in this risky homeopathy of its most salient form. What we might add to this is a question of degree: the more openly and dangerously a work of art "identified" in this way with the "hardened and alienated" forms of social exchange, the less "modernist" it was in the very sense we have been discussing, and (here comes the familiar Lyotardian paradox or *hysteron proteron*) the more "postmodernist" it makes sense to call it. Where we see this question of degree most dramatically performed is on the stage of the avant-garde, where all the greatest risks were taken, and where the felt need to ward off the commodity form by putting on its intimate garb was strongest.

Particularly we should mention two seminal avant-garde modernists, most often celebrated as the originators of postmodern play: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp. The prose of Gertrude Stein, at the stage of her exquisite *Tender Buttons*, is characterized by a sudden, vertiginous sense that the past and future have been liquidated, and we are inhabiting a pure, dimensionless present in which words are behaving like counters on an infinite grid, one no more valuable or important than any other. It is as perfect an aesthetic "expression" of the kind of sensibility we might imagine internal to the market itself as we have, a pure, neutral matrix of verbal exchange. That is to say, the prose has no interest in "refusing" the market, but seeks to occupy its space on behalf of a curious, good-humoured, cranky intelligence. The effect is perfectly exhilarating, since the result is the very opposite of a "commodity" in the sense of a saleable item. In market terms, *Tender Buttons* had, and has, almost nil exchange value. But it

[16] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 28.

doesn't have any use value either; it expresses exactly what a commodity might feel like if you asked it, stranded between use and exchange—and this, I want to say, is already fully postmodern. It is here as if, as the thesis goes, modernization is already complete, the agonizing overturning of old customs and the possible socialist utopia are finished with, and we are in the web of market relations up to our eyes and ears.

It is the same with Duchamp. The gap between the form of the commodity and the form of the artwork in his early readymades is so minimal as to be imperceptible, and that is the point. Looking at these works, you are looking directly at commodities, and simultaneously at an art market and a museum culture that has been irresistibly commodified, and you are caught between laughing and howling in protest. This is perfectly postmodern, and once again, the difference between it and a Suprematist painting by Malevich is a question of degree: different levels of identification with the market form, which is exactly how I want to settle the dispute between modernism and postmodernism, and to explain why, if postmodernism is in crisis today, it is only because various kinds of modernism are back on the agenda.

In the early days of modernity, it took a maverick genius of the calibre of Stein or Duchamp to sense, and to give form to, what it might feel like to live inside a perfectly developed, universally extended abstract network; but the capacity for making that imaginative and aesthetic leap was already there, implicit in the spreading market relation itself. The market is a neutral mechanism of exchange; it is, in that sense, perfectly indifferent to its actual, worldly, dimension or reach. It is already, on its own terms, infinite. To grasp the inner law of the market is a matter of entering its continuous present and doing something with it; this includes aesthetic work, and that work can be every bit as undecidably "critical" or "conformist" as Stein or Bret Ellis, Duchamp or Jeff Koons. This is what I would urge us to call postmodernism: the aesthetic embodiment of an inner experience of the market as a pure form. It is just that, given the historical, global development of market relations over the last hundred years, it is today spontaneously much easier to take this route, and in some sense it is more "realistic" than it was in Stein's day. Today we all really *are* where Stein and Duchamp tried to imagine us being in 1912.

On the other hand, what we will want to persist in calling "modernism" is that other aesthetic option internal to our world: to side-step the free-fall into seamless capitalist immanence, and to register the contradictions—between media, between geographical blocs, between socio-historical epochs—that persevere even in an age of "full development." This was easier in an age of much more obvious and striking uneven development, but it is still available to us today, as any number of new initiatives and movements, such as the Dogme manifesto of 1995, the infrarealist provocations of Bolaño, the remodernist film movement, and beyond. Seen this way, modernism and postmodernism have always coexisted as conjoint aesthetic twins, born from the inseparable but antagonistic parents of the modern era itself: a neutral matrix of abstract exchange, and a lived world of vast social disparities and irreconcilable energies. One twin waxed in an age of incomplete market saturation; the other waxed when that saturation had been achieved. But neither has given up the ghost, and both will continue to kick for as long as we are to endure the contradictory coordinates of a capitalist world.

III

None of which will explain why, of all terms, "affirmation" should be posted to the masthead of this new venture in "modernist studies," new or otherwise. In place of a lengthy theoretical justification, in these concluding paragraphs we prefer instead to offer a provocation. Doubtless, intellectuals of a certain stripe will tend to express an ingrained hostility towards any concept as steeped in justification and apology as this one is. We will not readily forget Herbert Marcuse's critique of the "affirmative character of culture," of the bourgeoisie's "lifting" of the spiritual world "out of its social context, making culture a (false) collective noun and attributing (false) universality to it."[17] The ideological benefits of this sublimation are too obvious to ignore—sequestering cultural goods apart from the horrors of capitalist accumulation means that they become an alibi, a veil; the prophylaxis of "spirit" tends towards an apologetics of the status quo. Critical Theory's intemperate relationship with culture conceived in this light developed logically enough from its own fitful genesis in the encounter between a high German philosophical tradition, and those European avant-

[17] Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1968), 94-95.

gardes that had surcharged their contempt for "affirmation" with a viable aesthetic praxis of negation. Adorno is to serialism what Benjamin is to Surrealism: critique ignited by affirmative culture's tendency to eat itself in defiant, if doomed, epochal gestures of *épater le bouregois*. Theory itself is the rippling through the medium of thought of this avant-gardist auto-critique of culture's affirmative character; and it is no wonder that the "hermeneutics of suspicion" engendered by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud should have underwritten the many adventures of Theory in its adamant refusal of the affirmative.

But to say Nietzsche is to evoke a countervailing current against nihilism itself, of which "culture" so conceived was but a fig leaf. Nietzsche's late Romantic recapture of a Dionysian corrective to the superabundance of Apollonian "affirmation" functioned to convert the latter into what it always already was: a negation of life. To affirm in a Dionysian key is to expose the prevailing nihilism of a cultural will to power in the grip of some fundamental malaise. If we call that malaise "capital," it is only to underscore the contradictions internal to any culture predicated on its dynamics. "Affirmative culture" in Marcuse's sense is the nihilistic conversion of artistic events and their difficult subjective fidelities into commodities; a conversion that is never fully successful. Affirmation in Nietzsche's sense holds fast to what resists the conversion, to the laborious *becoming* of which all such acts are the palpable traces. Calibrating the complex relations between action, reaction, affirmation, and negation in Nietzsche's thought, Deleuze writes that

> affirmation and negation extend beyond action and reaction because they are the immediate qualities of becoming itself. Affirmation is not action but the power of becoming active, *becoming active* personified. Negation is not simple reaction but a *becoming reactive*. It is as if affirmation and negation were both immanent and transcendent in relation to action and reaction; out of the web of forces they make up the chain of becoming. Affirmation takes us into the glorious world of Dionysus, the being of becoming and negation hurls us down into the disquieting depths from which all reactive forces emerge.[18]

[18] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone, 1983), 54.

Transposing this language into the economic rhythms of capitalism and its cultural symptoms, we propose that *art* is what gainsays the nihilism out of which it is generated, through two species of affirmation: the affirmation of unconquered anachronisms and residues, the "out-of-jointness" of cultural and ideological situations; or the affirmation of the "nothing" itself, the void of any situation sustained by an inhuman matrix of equivalence and exchange. Against both of these living, affirmative options there rests the vast bovine fact of "culture" itself, a reactive accommodation to worldlessness, an annihilating tissue of reconciliations to what annihilates. Whether it affirms the void (postmodernism) or affirms the *unheimlich* and unaccommodated (modernism), art espouses the "becoming active" of a will to power not yet in thrall to reaction.

Badiou's ongoing call for an "affirmationist" art takes an intransigent position against a postmodernism that he characterises in terms of "a degraded didactico-romanticism, a kind of avant-garde without the avant-garde," "weak classicism," and "the paroxysms of particularity."[19] Shoring up the successes of the "Great Twentieth Century" with the crying of a canon that will have surprised few and energised nobody—Pessoa, Brecht, Rothko, Celan, Berg, Brancusi—, Badiou demands a revived affirmationism purged of neo-romanticism and classicism both, and adequate only to the inhuman "mathematics of being" (140; Alvaro de Campos). But such affirmation is tantamount to reaction against a contemporary modality of artistic practice, itself profoundly affirmationist, that fails to register on Badiou's Neoplatonic radar. We here at *Affirmations* affirm, to the contrary, a canon of our own, whose work we understand in continuity both with the prodigious aesthetic victories of "the Century," but also with the undiminishable achievements of the great postmodern generation of Pynchon, Rauschenberg and Stockhausen. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the affirmative genius of Jeremy Prynne, of Caryl Churchill, of David Lynch, of Denise Riley, of José Saramago, of Béla Tarr, of Rachel Whiteread, of Mahmood Darwish, of Rem Koolhaas, of Cindy Sherman, of Elfriede Jelinek, of Abbas Kiarostami, of Steve McQueen… Certainly we hold in the greatest contempt any "artist" who would capitulate to the "healthy" or "commonsensical" market nihilism that oozes through the *art pompier* of fawning courtiers like Franzen and Speilberg and the

[19] Badiou, "A Manifesto of Affirmationist Art," *Polemics*, 136-7.

ID poetics of a Rita Dove. For we understand affirmation in its richest and deepest, politically intransigent meaning: against the prevailing consensus that we are nothing but good little animals, true art affirms the existence of what does not exist, and tells us what we are not. What is not art, culture as such, reacts against that impossible demand with the usual blandishments of finitude, prim "human" modesties before the genome. But we see around us living signs of an unrestricted affirmation.

Adorno, most melancholy of critical theorists, outlined the affirmative dimension of aesthetic praxis in his posthumous work: "The iridescence that emanates from artworks, which today taboo all affirmation, is the appearance of the affirmative *ineffabile*, the emergence of the nonexisting as if it did exist. Its claim to existence flickers out in aesthetic semblance; yet what does not exist, by appearing, is promised. The constellation of the existing and nonexisting is the utopic figure of art."[20] And further: "Rabid criticism of culture is not radical. If affirmation is indeed an aspect of art, this affirmation is no more totally false than culture—because it failed—is totally false. […] Affirmation does not bestow a halo on the status quo," insists Adorno; "in sympathy with what exists, it defends itself against death, the telos of all domination" (328). Modernism and postmodernism are, as understood here, *both* affirmative, not in any kind of accommodation with the reigning order of things, but precisely in the gaps they institute between what is and what is not (yet). This embattled, minimalist "utopian dimension" is what sets modernism and postmodernism, as mutually mediated artistic and philosophic practices, apart from all other movements in the history of aesthetics, and in acute dynamic tension with nihilism. And this is what the present journal is above all committed to honouring and restoring to cognition, against the grain.

[20] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 305.