

The inception of Modernism: an essay on the building blocks of Modern thinking¹



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Resumo:

Este ensaio é uma reflexão comentada sobre as origens do Modernismo baseada em anotações feitas durante uma palestra ministrada pelo professor Louis Markos da Houston Baptist University. A intenção é contribuir para as discussões atuais sobre Modernismo literário em suas raízes e dimensões filosóficas, históricas e políticas.

Palavras-chaves: Modernismo; *avant-garde*, transições.

Abstract:

This essay is an annotated reflection on the origins of Modernism based on notes taken from a lecture ministered by Professor Louis Markos, of Houston Baptist University. The intention is to contribute to the current discussions on Literary Modernism and its philosophical, historical, and political roots and dimensions.

Keywords: Modernism; *avant-garde*; transitions.

Resumen:

Este ensayo es una reflexión anotada en las orígenes del Modernismo basados en notas tomadas de una conferencia ministrada por profesor Louis Markos, de Houston Baptist University. La intención es contribuir a las discusiones

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actuales sobre modernismo literario y sus raíces y dimensiones filosóficas, históricas, y políticas.

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In this essay I present a quite short historical sketch on the philosophical source of Modern thought and, in so doing, I mainly intersperse my views on the origins of Modernism with views adapted from a lecture ministered by Professor Louis Markos, of Houston Baptist University, an internationally renowned North-American university professor carefully selected by this author for his recognized intellectual distinction. Therefore, I hereby intend to richly comment on the explanations provided by Professor Markos, who anticipates Modern literature as a revolutionary as well as reactionary art form.

The general goal is to share both insights with Brazilian and international audiences alike so as to contribute to the current discussions on Literary Modernism and its philosophical, historical, and political roots and dimensions. To do so, an essayistic-narrative method was chosen in order to allow for ideas to flow connectedly as a permeable strand.

According to Cambridge University professor Geoffrey Kantaris (2007), the dawn of Modern times has been attributed to many disparate events. Some attempt to align Modernity with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, following the French Revolution. Their main pitch claims as evidence the embrace of rationalism, of positivism, and the newborn beliefs in science and progress, the ultimate culmination of Enlightenment rationality. This would be the explanation based on thought and rationality. Others prefer a more politico-ideological argument. There have been a considerable number of economically based arguments. Some blame the technological environment of high capitalism, says Kantaris (1997).

Since our main interest here is literature, it too could not help but provide many explanations. One is that of the late William Faulkner, who suggested that Modernism in arts began with a dissociation of nineteen

century assumptions which had, in the course of time, become like dead conventions (cf.: Bradshaw 2003:152).

We ought to begin in a moment of history when western thought as we know it, that is, as a legacy of the times of Plato, was going through an unprecedented paradigm shift. This was a little over a century ago, nevertheless, its repercussions helped lay the foundations for what is now known as the term 'Modern', or 'Modern Theory' and eventually as Modern-'ism'.

So as to best explore such shift, we must first understand the concept of another term, i.e., Logocentrism.

Professor Markos begins his lecture with an attempt to define this term in a didactic fashion and it is there we shall actually start. Logocentrism is described as the theoretical, theological and philosophical orientation that has permeated our, so called, western thought since ancient Greece (2008). In other words, up to what we now know as the Modern period, the majority of philosophers and thinkers were logocentric in their reasoning, which means to say, in practical terms, that they considered meaning to emanate from an originary source they called the *Logos*. This source was to be pure, undebased and undefiled.

Others, more radical epistemologically speaking, have posited that the *Logos* is, in fact, internal to man, and is also known as the transcendent ego. What they are actually doing is taking the *Logos* out of its purity, its heavenly *status*, and placing it within the human being. We can see a displacement and relocation there.

When we talk about art, in general, or literature, in specific, we can then say that the best aesthetics is that which best represents the *Logos*. The best painting or sculpture or novel is that which expresses the *Logos* in its physical form and, in addition, encapsulates truths which are eternal, and that is why some people call art 'transcendent'. As a result, this piece of art must lie outside any given historical period, and therefore, be timeless. Consequently, the success of this "incarnation" often functions as the supreme standard, or the touchstone, against which all other art is measured.

That has been the traditional way of looking at art since Plato. In order to interpret that art one must search for its meaning and, through the logocentric point of view, meaning is found within the work of art and it is, at the same time, its final point of reference. Mind you, the destination of the search for meaning not only is already there but is also above the physical constraints of time and space, rendering the ultimate function of art to point back to itself. That explains why some people say that art is a means to a higher end.

Professor Markos adds that, as far as definitions go, another important aspect of Logocentrism is that it expresses itself through binaries, i.e., a set of two related terms, in which the first term, which is perceived to be closer to the *Logos*, is privileged over the second term, seen as a “falling away” from the first (2008).

Among the historically traditional binaries that involve the privilege of the first over the second term are: in the world of languages, speech over writing, and yet, overt linguistic communication over the so called ‘non-verbal’ forms of communication; in psychoanalysis, conscious over unconscious; in academia, theory over praxis; in religion, soul over body; in philosophy, essence over existence; in culture, genius over art; in behavioral sciences, rational over emotional (Ayers 2004:132).

In simpler language, that which is closer to perfection, to the eternal, to the unchanging, to the immortal, is privileged over that which changes, perishes or decays.

The feminists have contributed to the understanding of this line of thinking by rightfully accusing Logocentrism of being patriarchal (Parsons 2007:64), which is true for the most part, and they added the following binaries: male over female, white over non-white, Western over non-Western, canonical over marginal.

A different way of looking at binaries is spatially. They can be described vertically, being the first term of the binary the one that points up and the second term the one that points down. Inversely, they can be described horizontally, in that the first term is seen as the center, or the closest to

it, and the second as the farther, the most distant to the center and closer to the outer edges and therefore marginal (Markos 2008). Hence the expression ‘marginalized’ used to refer to the way women or minorities have been historically often treated. Interestingly, when people are said to look for higher meanings or deeper meaning they are, in fact, searching the same thing.

Having said that, we will now look at how four distinct personalities have subverted and ultimately subverted this *status quo*. Professor Markos (2008) briefly skims the theories of Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, and we will try to see how they radically opened doors to a new view of reality, meaning, thought and art. It was their originality, their *avant-garde* sense which ultimately culminated with Modernism as we know it today.

Now, let us see Freud’s contribution. Before Freud, the conscious mind was privileged over the unconscious. He disrupted this. Freud, the Modernist, inverted this established binary positing that the unconscious mind was the true source, the “*Logos*”, and therefore the origin of conscious thought. Profoundly depressed by the determinism of Freud, Virginia Woolf write in her diaries that the above mentioned notions of human beings as being all instinct, all unconscious, made her deeply question man, society and freedom (Parsons 2007:126).

Before Freud, mental “normalcy” was placed at the center of society and neurotics were marginalized, both culturally and institutionally. Freud, the Modernist, de-centered this view, positing neurosis as the norm through which society and humanity should be viewed, and so much so that if today, someone thinks of him or herself as “normal” - if that even exists – they are the ones who belong out there in the margin. A similar inversion occurred in Darwinian evolution.

Before Darwin, the spiritual side of man was at the center, and the physical side was marginal. Darwin, the Modernist, brought forth that the center is no longer the soul or the spirit, the center is the physical, animal body. Before Darwin, man came downward, from Heaven, as God’s creation.

Darwin, the Modernist, posited that instead of coming down, man, in fact, turned upward, evolving from simple matter and going up - the basis for the concept of evolution.

Surely the debate is fierce. For the sake of argument let us just say that it takes a great deal of faith to believe in both, either creation or evolution, after all, neither one can be entirely and flawlessly proved. Nonetheless, the debate remains of extreme importance, since myths are what we found our cultures upon. Unfortunately, politics takes its toll and often the debate becomes but a diversion to the real battle, which is which paradigm should ultimately rule society, in other words, Logocentrism or Modernism, since they are but two different ways or orientations of looking at society and ourselves. More radical de-centerings were effected by Marx and Nietzsche.

In simple words, Marx claimed that all society is created by economic forces, the means and modes of production, that, in turn, determine everything, from philosophy, through religion, to aesthetics (Eagleton 1985:65).

Before Marx, beauty and meaning were sought in Heaven, or in heavenly grounds. For Marx, 'meaning' starts down at the base and moves upward, towards higher stances, just as human thoughts do, and for the same reasons, for they are both created and sustained by those same economic forces that create and sustain everything else, and whatsmore, they can never be independent of them.

Marx, the Modernist, posited that human ideas do not create historical forces, but historical forces create human ideas. A very nice example is that of early North-American history, in that it was not the founding fathers that created democratic Capitalism, it was Capitalism that created the founding fathers.

As we can see, in Marxism, art loses its transcendent *status*, because neither art nor the artist are able to break free from the politico-economical forces that create them. As a matter of fact, art cannot hope to express transcendental or real, pure truth, having the source it has. Literature, in

turn, is clearly nothing but a by-product of socio-economical forces, and therefore, it cannot hope to be eternal either, for it is just like any other man-made creation, like a machine is. Even Shakespeare is not immortal or eternal, but merely a by-product of his own socio-economical *milieu*.

Nietzsche took a step even further. He broke down the faith, the old logocentric faith in the accessibility and even, more extreme, in the possibility of meaning. In an essay called “On truth and falsity in their ultramoral sense”, Nietzsche writes, and I quote, “truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions” (1911). In this piece of work, Nietzsche denies the very existence of any *Logos* whatsoever. In other words, for him, there is no such thing as absolute truth, or absolute beauty, for they are illusions that man constructed and then forgot he constructed it. For Nietzsche, there is no truth apart of that which man creates, and for him, even God is a man-made truth, which means to say that God did not create man, but rather man created God – and then forgot he had done so.

Judging by these four *avant-garde* men and their *avant-garde* ideas, who paved the way for their generation, and the next, to move decidedly away from the old logocentric faith – which by the way is still pretty much alive and kicking in some fields of academia even today - we can now safely assume that after them, that old paradigm has been irreparably disrupted to the point of actually closing an era and inaugurating a new one, the one we shall call the Modern era.

As for final concluding remarks, I hope readers have grasped some of the important intellectual and *readerly* aspects of the inception and of the philosophical uprising of Modernism, especially since late nineteenth century on its way well deep into the twentieth century and beyond. Notably, the coverage of the topics was inevitably partial, which I hope to have redeemed with the insertion of occasional sidelights that ranged from almost microscopic detail to broader generalizations concerning the intellectual framework of the cultural events of the decades in question.

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