Ugly Modernity: Its Unseen Sides (online, 8-9 Jun 23)

online, Jun 8–09, 2023
Deadline: Feb 8, 2023
sites.google.com/york.ac.uk/uglymodernity-itsunseensides/home?authuser=0

Marte Stinis

The term ‘modernity’ signifies a brand new age, distinguishing human experiences and values as different from the past. From the mid-nineteenth century, ‘modern life’ began to denote transformations in all aspects, such as technology, economics, industry and urbanisation. In the cultural field, modernity is grounded in critical methods for creating new values to promote the progress of humanity.

The idea of modernity is often lauded as unique, original, innovative, avant-garde, and, within art history, as the grounds for contemporary art. There is an inherent problem in this conception, however, as it glosses over some crucial dimensions of the definition. What about the uglier aspects of modernity? What of the racism, sexism, industrialism, climatic damage, imperialism, colonialism, and waste?

If our celebration of modernity consists of a series of historical progresses, our interest in postmodernism would necessitate inquiry into these questions. By whom is modernity recognised as an advance of human history? Do people from any corner of the world consider modernity as a progressive process without discrepancy? What of the lesser-acknowledged yet pressing issues underneath the clean veneer of modernisation? Does modernity always promise us a better future?

For example, J.M.W. Turner’s painting Rail, Steam and Speed: The Western Railway (1844) or the Impressionist visions of Paris (Monet, Caillebotte, Renoir) are often seen as fundamental developments in Western artistic modernity, yet they belie a polluted and industrial history that is hidden underneath bright colours and new forms. Modernity is built on industry, capitalism, and imperialism as much as it is built on abstract ideas. ‘Western’ modernity was, moreover, not an isolated process; it was part of a complex constellation of global processes, including international trade, imperialist and colonialist exploitation, and cultural appropriation.

Simultaneously, within the field of literature, the idea of ‘Western modernity’ had complex reverberations upon contemporary Eastern imagination, which in turn impacted on ‘Western’ thought and practice. For example, W. B. Yeats was committed to many aspects of Eastern culture but also confronted a political dilemma in relation to the British Empire as an Anglo-Irish poet.

In recent years, critics have also shed new light on the notion of modernity in terms of a marginalised area of study such as occultism and esotericism. Their critical attention has literally pointed to the ‘unseen’ or the ‘invisible’ as present on a much broader scale than previously assumed,

and in so doing, redefining the concept of Western esotericism. Hence, the study of modernity has rapidly expanded its scope by crossing the boundaries between countries and cultures. This project aims at bringing together ideas, observing how modernity has been considered to hide the darker sides of human history within cultural activities including literature, poetry, art and knowledge-making.

This project aims at bringing ideas together, observing how modernity has been considered to reveal the dark side of human history in cultural activities including literature, poetry, art and knowledge-making. We particularly welcome papers looking at the following themes and topics:

Aesthetic ideologies and represented others
- (Ab)use of nature/capitalism
- Cultural hierarchy and barriers
- Gendered and raced bodies
- Institutions and colonial/imperial histories
- Affect theory
- Cultural appropriation
- Health (physical, psychological/mental)
- Occultism and esotericism

Please submit the proposals before 8th of February, 2023, with a 300-word abstract (including the title) and a short bio (as well as institutional affiliation, if any) of no more than 150 words, to uglymodernity@gmail.com

Organisers:
Kazuki Inoue
Marte Stinis
Louise Yang

Reference:
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