How does one define oneself? With what does one identify? What defines the way one thinks, and what makes the world in which one lives different from the world of one’s ancestors? These are pressing questions that cut straight to the heart of what it means to be human. They are questions that have been grappled with in every era by every generation. For our generation, they can be boiled down into one question: what is modernity? Although the question seems simple, its answer is elusive. Part of the problem is that the modern world is defined by change. Since the industrial revolution, the world has been changing radically on both a cultural and intellectual level. Perhaps modernity is then best defined as change; or, more precisely, the struggle to cope with change. By examining the works of several authors on the subject of the birth of modernity in Europe, one can see how the attempts of people of the time to cope with change led to the birth of the modern mindset. One can see through these sources that modernity might best be described as the coping with radical change, either by struggling to redefine one’s self, or retreating into the aloofness of spectacle.

One could say that modernity began with the re-envisioning of that peculiarly modern institution, the city. Nowhere is this re-envisioning more obvious than in Paris, where, during the reign of Napoleon III, architect George Haussmann transformed the city from a mediaeval maze to an exemplar of modern efficiency. According to the historian David Pinkney, Haussmann’s changes to the city were massive. Before the renovations, Paris was a crowded warren, where poorly paved roads meandered through vast slums (Pinkney 18). The result was that cross-city traffic was stifled, and people tended to stay within their neighborhoods. As Pinkney puts it, “Parisians of a century ago ordinarily lived, worked, and found their pleasures within the confines of a few blocks” (Pinkney 17). Furthermore, the city was a smelly, unclean place, which still relied on medieval sewage systems (Pinkney 19). Diseases such as cholera ran rampant, especially in poorer neighborhoods (Pinkney 20).

Haussmann attempted to change Paris by making wide streets, or boulevards, which would open up the city to traffic (Pinkney 27). Many of these new boulevards ran through slums, which were demolished to make way for them (Pinkney 39). These boulevards were also laid out in a grid, and their straight lines and right angles completely effaced the old winding and random streets of Paris, which had not been arranged by any particular logic, but rather had accumulated haphazardly through the centuries. The end result was a city which was much more economically efficient, but one which had lost much of its old “character.” Gone were the neighborhoods where people would spend their entire lives. Pinkney quotes the French poet and...
writer Jules Romains as saying of the new Paris that Parisians could now “move about just as they liked and... distance was the last thing that counted” (qtd. in Pinkney 17).

These changes had a huge psychological impact on people of the era. As T.J. Clark points out in his book, *The Painting of Modern Life*, people of the time felt as if they had been robbed of something, as if the essence of old Paris had been replaced by a new Paris that was more efficient but also more alienating. With the death of the old neighborhoods, the city became homogenized (Clark 54). This created a crisis of identity for many Parisians. Prior to Haussmann’s reforms, each neighborhood had its own style of dress, its own economic specialization, and its own unique feel (Clarke 54). Without these cultural clues, many Parisians felt as if they did not belong; as if they were adrift on in a sea of anonymity. This very real problem was compounded by the fact that as the city changed, the collective memory of old Paris was romanticized (Clarke 44). Much of this is, as Clark points out, a fantasy, but it was a fantasy that served to underscore a real loss of identity (Clark 44). Parisians felt that Paris had been rebuilt as a sepulcher, with the city’s old vibrancy sacrificed for sterile efficiency.

The question then becomes why was such a sacrifice made? For many Parisians, the answer could seemingly be found in one word: money. It was widely held, and, incidentally quite true, that Haussmann and a few select others became quite rich off of building the city (Clarke 43). That so many would be so affected for the gain of so few deeply upset Parisians. However, the embezzlement of Huassmannization is merely a small part of a larger dissatisfaction with capitalist markets. As Karl Marx points out in *The Communist Manifesto*, capitalism and the factory system dissolve the previous relationships between provider and consumer. It replaces these human relationships with cold, calculating, monetary relationships. The human element is forced out of the market for the sake of capital. This can be seen in the replacement of neighborhood stores in Paris by large department stores, whose homogenized selections and central locations contributed greatly to the decline of neighborhood identities (Clark 52-59).

Perhaps no one shows the effect of capitalism on modernity better than the impressionist painter Manet. Many of Manet’s works show the effects of modernity on life. Take for example, the painting *Exposition Universelle de 1867*. In this painting of the Universal Exposition of 1867 Manet portrays the artificiality of the new Paris by showing the heavily landscaped Exposition grounds in the background, and he shows the social isolation of that new city by painting the men and women viewing the fair as aloof and stand-offish, separated from each other even though they are in a crowd (Clark 60). However, it is Manet’s most controversial work, *Olympia*, through which he best portrays the nature of capitalism in modernity. *Olympia* shows a nude prostitute reclining in bed. Her servant is presenting her flowers from a suitor, and a black cat sits by her feet. According to Clarke, simply by choosing to portray a prostitute, Manet is making a powerful statement about capitalism. As Clark puts it, “prostitution is a sensitive subject for bourgeois society because sexuality and money are mixed up in it...Something in the nature of capitalism is at stake, or at least not properly hidden” (Clark 102). By using a prostitute as the subject, Manet shows quite bluntly how the crassness of money relations has corrupted society.

To further emphasize this point, Manet creates *Olympia* to be a sort of photographic negative of a famous Renaissance painting, Titian’s *The Venus of Urbino* (Clarke 93). The beautiful, clean, nude of Titian is replaced by a dirty prostitute; the dog, a symbol of fidelity, is replaced by a cat, a symbol of sexual promiscuity (Clarke 93). Manet does this to highlight how the introduction of capital into life
has destroyed relations between people. *Olympia*, then, is at its heart a painting that lambastes capitalism and the new status quo of money relations and falsity. Yet at the same time the painting fails to take the next step to begin to form an alternative identity. Through *Olympia*, Manet was able to critique, but he was unable to build. In this sense, the painting serves as an excellent allegory for modernity, for it shows that Manet, like many of his fellow Parisians, was struggling to find a new way to identify in a changing world.

For others, however, the struggle to find new identity was simply not worth it. Rather, they became wrapped up in the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, and forsook the problems of the modern world to take part in enjoyable diversions. For these people the spectacle was everything. Their lives became eternal pursuits of the newest, the greatest, and the most novel form of entertainment. Pursuit of the spectacle allowed one to escape from the hard problems posed by the changes of the modern era. In a word, the spectacle was a way to opt-out of the problems of modernity.

In the poems of Charles Baudelaire, one can see the pursuit of the spectacle everywhere. Take, for example, the poem, “The Eyes of the Poor.” In this poem, Baudelaire describes a café, in which opulence and hedonism hold sway. The walls are bright and clean, the cornices are gilded, and pictures along the wall show a variety of historical and mythological feasts (Baudelaire 52). As Baudelaire puts it, “all history and all mythology [were] pandering to gluttony (Baudelaire 52). The opulence here serves as a form of escapism for the clients, shielding them from the real problems of the world. This is made clear when a poor family stops to look at the café, and the date of the poem’s narrator asks him to “send them way” (Baudelaire 53). She, and one can assume the other patrons of the café as well, do not want to be disturbed by the pressing needs of others. Rather, they would like nothing more than to become absorbed in the frivolity of spectacle, and thus hide from the world.

Historian Vanessa Schwartz spends much time analyzing different forms of the spectacle in turn of the century Paris in her essay, “Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus.” Perhaps one of the oddest spectacles which Schwartz documents is the Paris Morgue. Originally intended to serve the public by creating a place in which unidentified corpses could be identified, the morgue quickly grew to become a popular attraction visited by thousands of people from all ranks of society (Schwartz 88). Naturally, the vast majority of people who came had no intention of actually identifying one of the deceased on display. Rather, these people came simply because they thought of the morgue as a spectacle, something novel to be seen. The morgue, along with wax museums, functioned as the visual counterpart to the sensationalist press of the day (Schwartz 90, 93). It featured the bodies of dead criminals, murder victims, and many others whose exploits or tragedies had brought them to the attention of the Parisian press (Schwartz 90). For those who visited the morgue then, the trip was not so much a civic duty as it was a form of voyeurism, a way in which to see part of the “real” world without actually participating in reality (Schwartz 93). As Schwartz puts it, “the Morgue satisfied and reinforced the desire to look” (Schwartz 90).

In the case of the Morgue, one sees an example of how the desire for spectacle overwhelmed past mores. Prior to the nineteenth century, it would have been unthinkable to view the dead as a sort of exhibition. Such an act would have been considered disrespectful, and quite possibly even sacrilegious. However, in the modern world, the need felt by many to opt out of the struggle for new identity caused them to constantly seek new forms of distraction. The problem was that the illusion of the spectacle relied completely upon the newness of the distraction involved. Old forms of entertainment were simply not as good at hiding the real problems of the time. So as time progressed, the search for novel entrainments became more and more frantic, eventually culminating in the
breakdown of past morality.

However, there were some who resisted the urge to escape into the spectacle. For these people, the search for a new way in which to identify and express their selves became an all consuming pursuit. In his book *Fin-des-siecle Vienna*, historian Carl Schorske documents the struggles of one such group: the artists of the Secessionist movement in Vienna. The Secessionists were a group of young artists who rejected the traditional realism of their elders in favor of a more abstract style of art which they felt better captured the essence of modern man (Schorske 214-215). The leader of this movement was an artist known as Gustav Klimt. Through Klimt’s work, one gains an insight into the soul of a man desperately seeking for new identity in the face of change. This can be seen in the wide variety of styles Klimt embraces (Schorske 217). For example, early in his career, Klimt relies heavily upon mythological symbols. This can be seen in the art he submitted to the *Ver Sacrum*, the Secessionist journal. Pieces such as the “Theseus Poster,” clearly rely on the established symbolism of classical mythology to give them meaning (Schorske 216). According to Schorske, Klimt used mythological symbols as a way to “excavate the instinctual” (Schorske 223). Later in his life, Klimt developed his own unique symbols, through which he revealed his own psyche (Schorske 270). In the painting, *The Kiss*, Klimt used his own original symbols of the black rectangle and multi-colored circle to represent male and female sexuality (Schorske 270).

The search for new meaning and identity came at a great cost. In abandoning the understandings of the world used by their elders, the Secessionists left themselves with no worldview with which to describe the nature of reality (Schorske 225). The result was a questioning of the meaning of reality itself, and an interpretation of the world that was dark and pessimistic. In the paintings Klimt did for the University of Vienna, he portrayed the various schools of the University in a mysterious and even sinister perspective that was far from what the commissioners had in mind (Schorske 228). In this case the ambiguity of the modern world left Klimt unable to portray the “inevitable triumph of reason” that was expected by the professors of the University. For Klimt and others who actively sought new meaning and identity in the modern world nothing was inevitable and everything was modable.

The synthesis between these two great themes of modernism (the search for meaning and the spectacle) can be found in the works of the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, the ballet company owner Sergei Diaghilev, and other intellectuals like them. According to historian Modris Eksteins, Stravinsky and Diaghilev believed that it was through the shock and novelty of the surprise that people were called out of their modern lethargy and back into true experience (Eksteins 32). As Diaghilev put it, “surprise is freedom” (Eksteins 32). In this belief, these men were attempting to re-assert the importance of spontaneity and creativity in a world which seemed preoccupied only with the apparent certainties of reason (Eksteins 31). By going against the norms of ballet—a rigidly orthodox genre of music—Stravinsky hoped to use his work not only as a piece of self expression, but also as a means of delivering his audience from the confines of modern convention (Eksteins 31). When Stravinsky created *The Rite of Spring*, he went out of his way to make it as shocking and as new as he could (Eksteins 40). As Nijinsky, Stravinsky’s choreographer, put it, the goal of *The Rite of Spring* was to be “new, beautiful, and utterly different— but for the ordinary viewer a jolting and emotional experience” (Eksteins 41).

The audience unfortunately seemed only to pick up on the jolting aspect of *The Rite of Spring*, for at the ballet’s premiere, there was a riot among the dissatisfied audience (Eksteins 13). While in theory shocking the audience into action could be considered the point of this piece, the fact that the premiere escalated into a riot turned it into just another spectacle, easily viewed as an “event,” with no real impact on the lives of the audience members. Despite Stravinsky’s best efforts, the audience and
the city in general were not truly changed by *The Rite of Spring*. The ballet did not force them to re-examine their beliefs about reason and convention. Rather, they were able to take the ballet and the riot it precipitated and consume them as just one more spectacle in modern life. In the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, one can see the clash between those who attempted to redefine themselves in the face of modernity, and those who chose simply to view the world as spectacle. These two groups both viewed the same ballet, but each thought of it in such a radically different way that one would be tempted to believe that they had instead seen two separate events.

Defining modernity is an uphill struggle. When Baudelaire described modernity as the “ephemeral, the fugitive, [and] the contingent,” it was because it is almost impossible to say anything more specific about it. Perhaps though, this ambiguity is the point. Modernity is change, and as such can never be concretely defined as anything for very long. It is better to examine the reactions of people to see exactly what has happened in the modern world. Through Pinkney’s analysis, one can see how the change of the city caused people to lose their ties of identity, and forced them to confront very real problems. In Manet, one can see someone who could accurately describe the problems of modernity, but was unable to find an adequate solution. With Baudelaire’s poetry, one can see how many attempted to escape from the problems and changes of modernity through the spectacle, becoming consumers of novelty in order to avoid reality. This point is carried to its conclusion by Schwartz, who shows that the search for new spectacle led people to disregard old morals. The works of Gustav Klimt and the Secessionists, however, show that some still sought to grapple with the problems of modernity, though their search for meaning created problems. Finally, in *The Rite of Spring*, one can see how even the same event could be viewed differently by those who faced modernity and those who hid behind the spectacle. Naturally, with this many viewpoints, there is much contradiction; but this too is part of modernity. All of these examples show how modernity forced people to either alter their perceptions about themselves and the world, or simply refuse to partake in reality. Modernism then, might best be described as simply the choice between struggle or lethargy; the choice between seeking new identity, or sinking into anonymity.

REFERENCES


