Re-thinking Modernity

In the European school system the concept of modernity encompasses a very wide chronological range: it includes the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, only coming to a close around the dramatic events of 1789, after which the “contemporary age” would begin, to continue uninterrupted up to the present day. Naturally, one may disapprove such a simplified didactic framework, viewing it as the lamentable result of a strange mental laziness. Surely, the people of the 17th century were on right in calling themselves “the moderns” as opposed to “the ancients” of the previous ages; and indeed in the 17th century the famous *Querelle des ancients and des modernes* resurfaced. But why should we, today, share their conviction? Obviously, what was modern then is not such any longer; it has become “ancient.”

On the other hand, if we reject the extended use of modernity presented by the manuals we have no reliable term or criterion to designate a long period of several centuries as a unified cultural bloc; we would be left only with the possibility of referring to each one of them with the name of the prevailing historical phenomenon. We would have the sequence Renaissance, New Science, Enlightenment for 16th, 17th and 18th centuries respectively. But in this way the awareness of the inner continuity binding the entire period in question would be irremediably lost. And regardless of what we choose to emphasize in the concept of modernity, we could not in any way sever it from the legacies of Descartes and Empiricism, Galileo, Newton and scientific experimentalism, or from the 18th century awareness and relevance of human rights in socio-political life. Furthermore, we soon realize that these cultural developments do not stop at the 1789 frontier: the French revolution which inherits and consolidates them, also projects them into the following century. This kind of modernity, therefore, remote as it may appear, continues to develop through the full 19th century, with Positivism in philosophy and natural sciences, with Naturalism in art and literature. Obviously one may feel that all this does not correspond to what we may call “effective modernity,” belonging to the present cultural condition. For instance, the novel in which we believe today, or that in which we believed until yesterday, is bound to the names of Joyce, Proust, Kafka … literary experiences which are definitely opposed to the Naturalism of the 19th century. The same feeling one gets in the visual arts, where “effective modernity” in the last hundred years has had very little to share with Impressionism. Again, we face here an almost desperate lack of reliable terms to identify very distinct phenomena. How can we be sure, in fact, that Balzac and Zola, like the realist-naturalist
painters from Delacroix to Courbet, to the Impressionists, have nothing to do with modernity.

Surprisingly perhaps, some help may come from the simplified categories of the European scholastic tradition, specifically from the interplay of the two key terms, “modern” and “contemporary.” As we have noticed, the first is reserved to the concept established by the “moderns” of few centuries ago, while the second indicates a more recent modernity, our own age. This may appear as a mere play on words: how would we practically distinguish between “modern” and “contemporary”? In common usage, always decisive in these matters, they are interchangeable, and “modern” tends to prevail in every statement referring to what is happening today. Here is our proposal, then: let us substitute the common and equivocal “contemporary” with the beleaguered, ill-omened “postmodern,” which torments the ongoing cultural debate. Finally, let us proceed by establishing two wide chronological blocs: the first, spanning from the end of the 15th century to the French Revolution, shall be called “modern,” faute de mieux; while the other, from the French Revolution to the present, shall be called “postmodern,” notwithstanding common uses and abuses of this recently created label. But, is it not true that the critical debate on modernity and postmodernity is today in a situation of total bagarre? Is there no consensus on the use of the two terms to allow for productive recognition and in-depth analysis of the current phenomena? Why, then, not try to make use of old scholastic periodization with the advantage of a redefinition of “contemporary” as “postmodern”?

To be sure, one of the main reasons for the rejection of this manualistic approach consists in the presumptuous definition of an age on the basis of some rather ephemeral events. This practice indicates a concept of history which we now recognize as superficial, since it is tied to the dates of birth or death of major “historical” figures, to wars, battles or diplomatic records. In this way, assuming for a moment that we would accept the manualistic approach with no revisions, modern age would start from the fall of Constantinople (1452), or from the death of Lorenzo II Magnifico (1492), or from Christopher Columbus’s discovery (same year), and it would extend itself until the French Revolution or the post-Napoleon Wien Conference (1814). It is quite obvious that a framework of this kind does not assign any relevance whatsoever to “low” factors, to events concerning material culture which contemporary historiography, on the contrary, considers of great significance. We believe today that it is impossible to reconstruct history without considering means of production, technology and economy of a particular period. On the other hand it would not be wise to assign a quasi-metaphysical value to these factors, as Marxism tended to do in its innovative, but equally incomplete, historical perspective. Marx’s error consisted in making the primary structure of history out of the means of production, with respect to which all other cultural achievements, flowing from arts and science, would assume the secondary role of “overstructures.”

Today we can take advantage from the great tradition that could be defined as Cultural Historical Materialism, developed especially in North America by authors such as Leslie A. White, Marvin Harris, Harold A. Innis, Marshall McLuhan. This tradition is built on the fundamental axiom of cultural anthropology. For instance, the very notion of culture, in this perspective, is definitely placed “on the feet,” as Left Hegelianism wanted it. Man produces culture as he extends his natural attributes (hands, feet, sensorial organs, nervous system) by means of extra-organic instruments which enhance his capabilities constituting the sphere of material media; this is nothing more than the sphere of technics, of material interaction with the external world. This axiom is immediately followed by a second one: not only is man capable of assuming external protheses, he can also observe them with detachment, and imagine scenarios which are different from the one he is immersed in, study alternative uses of the same extensions or invent new ones. This is the dimension of technological innovation, and it is also the bridge that allows for the interaction between material and ideal culture. In order to imagine potential scenarios, future opportunities, the ideal culture employs symbolic forms which correspond to expressive, scientific, artificial and natural languages. For clarity we could add a third axiom, which in any case depends on the reciprocal congruence of the first two. The material and the symbolic dimensions develop through their continuous reciprocal rapport in a kind of very effective feed-back. Man is never wholly immersed in total praxis: as he makes and builds things, he imagines alternative or future scenarios with the help of symbols. It is in this very activity that we witness the passage from “low” to “high” culture; high culture in turn, leads to the creation of new technological possibilities which again reopen the circle. Man’s material extensions, media, result from projecting previous symbolic processes; they are destined to renew and change symbolic thought itself. There is a perfect circularity, therefore, in the interaction between “low” material culture and its “high” symbolic correspondent, a circularity that was not perceived by thinkers of the Hegelian Left and Marxism who, as recalled before, assigned logical and chronological preeminence to the material level with uneasy connections to the symbolic level.

In the 1950s Lucien Goldman made a noteworthy revision of the orthodox Marxist tradition, in terms of terminology and concept. We owe him the recognition of a substantial homogeneity of the two levels of culture, material and ideal. He states that in a given historical period they both function in the same way even though their areas of pertinence remain distinct; this functional identity he calls “homology,” a precious concept we shall make full use of in order to establish the “equal dignity” of the two levels of human endeavors. To clarify the point: we should not assume that in a given cultural cycle the activities of an artist, a writer and an epistemologist are caused by the economic, technological, and in general material structures of that particular period. What we have here, instead, is a whole organic environment, a global system in which every articulation functions following a common pattern, a process which is retracable in every field. An immediate corollary of this assumption is that a scholar can direct his research in every corner of the cultural continent according to his interests and with his own level of competence. He can rest assured that he will not be wasting his time; he will not get entangled in marginal investigations since the
center is everywhere; the general functioning model of the entire system can be recognized in every aspect of it.

Looking for a good analogy to this rather abstract description of a fundamental process, perhaps we can refer to the well known hydraulic phenomenon of communicative vessels. A cultural system is articulated like a complex of interconnected vessels of different shapes and diameters, some carrying a great quantity of fluid, some a minimum amount. We know that when a fluid is introduced in the circuit it flows in every vessel of the system and reaches the same level everywhere. Such a phenomenon can offer an excellent heuristic criterion, as speleologists well know: when exploring different caves apparently unconnected, if they find the same water level, they infer that a linking channel must exist and start looking for it. Similarly, when a literary critic and an epistemologist discover the same pattern in apparently unrelated phenomena of their respective fields, they conclude that a linkage exists.

Surely the fact that various vessels (to remain with our analogy) are of different sizes is not completely irrelevant. We have to consider that the vessel reserved to the technology of a particular period, based on horseback or mechanical locomotion for instance, has an enormous capacity, a wider diameter than the vessel reserved to the poetic research developed at the same time. The basic assumption does not change. A scrupulous inquiry would retrace the same functional pattern in both vessels; visual art and poetry in the age of steam engines would be different from art and poetry in the age of horseback locomotion. It appears inevitable that to label an entire cultural age, one would give preeminence to the technological vessel, which is the one of maximum capacity. And this is why Marshall McLuhan, studying the general system based on machines and industrial production appeared in the Western world around the middle of the 15th century, preferred to entitle it with Gutenberg (The Gutenberg Galaxy) rather than Leon Battista Alberti or Piero della Francesca, who were major figures of minor—though equally indicative—fields of human endeavors. On the other hand, he did not intend to demonstrate that Gutenberg anticipates the innovation of symbolic forms achieved by Alberti, Piero della Francesca and so many other Italian painters and architects of the time. Actually, a mere chronology of significant events certifies of the contrary: Masaccio, for instance, applied the vanishing point perspective during the third decade of the century, in the Cappella Brancacci frescoes, while the printing press was first employed by Gutenberg only twenty years after. But these are the delays which (to go back our analogy) are caused by the time employed by the same fluid to reach the same level in the whole circuit. We should also notice that it is not necessarily from the widest vessel that the fluid flows to the entire network; technology does not come first and therefore does not determine the quantity of fluid in the minor containers. It is understandable, however, that it would be destined to give its name to the entire cultural cycle in which it has such a leading role.

The awareness of the equal dignity of all vessels composing a cultural system indicates a clear advantage with respect to the fundamental axioms of orthodox Marxism. As mentioned already this philosophy, proud of the unquestionable courage with which it enhanced the relevance of material factors in culture, came to the excess of pointing almost exclusively on them with the result of weakening the effects and the role of ideas in culture (i.e., the formal-symbolic activity of philosophy, literature and fine arts). In orthodox Marxism these cultural vessels were consigned to a minor role, limited to the reinforcement of the hard cultural image determined by economic structure and class struggle.

For some time now, such a disproportionately hard concept of culture has met severe criticism from all quarters. This criticism, however, has set aside the difficult problem of the balance between material and symbolic levels of culture, and actually in reassessing the values of the second level it has incurred in the opposite error, providing unbalanced soft solutions. It would suffice here to think at the proposals coming from the semiotic cultural system of Jury Lotman in the 60s and 70s. He was extremely skillful in finding relevant links among various fields of research, but always at a high cultural linguistic level, decisively ignoring the possibilities of a vertical connection with the level of technology. In this way we obviously come to a dangerous reduction of our investigative tools and operational fields, to an unjustifiable repudiation of highly indicative elements of cultural identification. To go back again to our analogy, this type of criticism would isolate an entire portion of our hydraulic network, ignore it as if it did not exist. In summing up, we see that this escapist solution is the opposite of the one presented by Marxism: both of them reveal the lack of methodological tools needed to recognize equal dignity to material and symbolic levels in the totality of a cultural system; they pretend to gauge high cultural aspects neglecting completely the material level of technology. This is indeed a strange dismissal of responsibility, something that in psychoanalysis would be called repression.

Finally, there is a third avenue which is very successful today, consisting in the general positions expounded by the nouveaux philosophes Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze. They are quite right in criticizing traditional frameworks where the level of praxis, where man "constructs" his culture with the help of technology, is too drastically separated from a purely theoretical level which produces the "superior" forms of literature and science. The nouveaux philosophes newly aim at the unification of all components of human endeavors, on the ground of one single active process, which means, for instance, that to write or paint is a way of acting in succession without any dependance on a pre-established reality; reality is what we make, intertwining in one single action subject and object, activity and passivity.

But, coming back once more to our analogy of communicative vessels, this way of thinking would abolish every difference in shape and size among the different vessels involved. It is useful, instead, and indeed necessary, to differentiate among activities taking place in technology, literature or mathematics. Most certainly, we too believe that investigations conducted in any of these fields would yield a definite common pattern of functionality, but this should neither encourage quick unification and confusion of all of them, nor should it lead us.
to renounce the good services of their diversified applications. One should at least observe in what ways technology, literature, economy, and visual arts interact in a particular situation, before reducing all experiences to one. Finally the nouveaux philosophes openly show their preference for high symbolic forms, neglecting de facto the low material level of technology, and incurring like Lotman in a lamentable form of cultural repression.

Back to the question of modernity, the position of Cultural Historical Materialism is pretty well defined via McLuhan: modernity is born out of the great technological innovation posed by the movable character printing process developed by Gutenberg around the year 1450. It begins, then, with a terminus a quo which is not chronologically very different from the one assigned by school manuals. Modernity can also be defined as the age of machines, since the printing press really functions as the first machine, bearing all the peculiar characteristics we assign to industrial civilization; it is, in fact a device which allows serial production and a great number of identical products at low cost.

Let us stop here for a moment, to consider the relevant differences which distinguish McLuhan’s conception from any form of crude materialism leading to the inevitable spectre of determinism. To start, Gutenberg’s machine is devised for the production of a very special kind of goods: books, which in turn are the tools employed by high symbolic culture (culture tout-court, for many). As it is plainly clear, the two levels of culture are here connected, their respective destinies are “genetically” intertwined. Secondly, while it is true that McLuhan does not hesitate in calling the entire cycle of modernity “Gutenberg Galaxy,” bestowing the Nuremberg’s technologist a record of pre-eminence, it is also true that the supremacy is basically a honorific one, in homage to the “capacity” of the cultural vessel it represents; it does not indicate, to repeat, chronological precedence. McLuhan, actually, stresses the fact that a typical homologous innovation had appeared in the high level of culture some time before the printing press; he is referring, of course, to Renaissance perspective where the referent “Renaissance” is clearly employed to distinguish it from previous similar forms. If we maintain that this innovation occurred around the third and fourth decade of the 15th century, it follows that the printing press was developed after the discovery of perspective which, after all, had already been described with sufficient clarity by Leon Battista Alberti in *De pictura* (1435). As for the relationship between typography and Renaissance perspective, it responds perfectly to the character’s homology, in the terms proposed by Goldman. In other words, the two function in the same way within their respective cultural fields, they show the same modality of employment, all differences notwithstanding. Their functional pattern is based on the singleness of the point of view: the individual who uses typography or perspective concentrates his attention in a very restricted dimension, in a single central point from which visual rays flow constituting the well known pyramid model with the apex as vanishing point. As for the difference between the fruition of a printed book and that of a manuscript, we can notice, again, that the passage from one to the other implies a more restricted point of view since the typographic page, being produced by a “machine,” tends to become smaller in size; furthermore, it becomes more practical, easy to handle and transport. The beginning of typography marks the crisis of membraneous supports (animal skins and kid’s skin particularly) while paper becomes indispensable: from this moment in the Western world it becomes the privileged medium for transmitting information. The transformation is echoed in the visual arts where the adopted perspective, framed by point of view and vanishing point, bears material consequences indicating the privilege of light and economical physical supports: wood surfaces gradually become obsolete while canvases begin to dominate even over frescoes. Canvases soon will be set on rectangular wooden stretchers emphasized by external linear frames. Typographical page and oil painting then become homologous media destined to flourish and decline together.

More importantly, perhaps, the two newly established supports, paper and canvas, show internal homologies. Both of them, in fact, appear based on the “principle of discretion,” on the recognized capacity to break representational reality into a great number of homogeneous elements to be reassembled eventually. One could object that this option in favor of “discretion” had already been embraced by Western culture in remote times, since the adoption of phonetic alphabets. In fact, phonetic alphabet does not register ideas or forms of things, but different sounds that must be variously combined to become words, which in turn bear no similarity with the actual object they refer to. However, up to the time of manual scriptural practice, this discreet and atomistic character of the alphabet was not exploited to its fullest extent. It was instead the Gutenberg’s “machine” which made systematic use of it in order to obtain a highly effective and economic serial reproduction of written material. The retrieval of the “types” involved in the printing process is also the reason why we speak of the “movable characters” of the press.

The same principle applies to Renaissance perspective which is not only based on the uniqueness of the vanishing point, but also on the visual pyramid that emanates from it. Such a geometrical scheme is inserted in a space made up by an infinite number of points succeeding each other in straight lines which generate planes in a process of extreme regularity. Just as manuscript writing already implied some atomistic “discretion,” pre-Renaissance painting also implied Euclidean geometry; but in both cases these principles had very little of the impecable rigor modern age would soon be capable of. From this standpoint typography is more patently modern than perspective; in fact, while no one would doubt that the former is a radically new innovation unknown in previous ages, on the latter there is the suspicion that it was known already in Graeco-Roman culture, lost during in the Middle of Dark Ages, and then found again in the cultural period that not by accident was called Rinascimento (rebirth). But just a quick survey on perspective allows us to perceive that Renaissance men were in fact too modest since they did not understand the full power of their innovation. Before them, in classical times, perspective had been intuitive, based on the principle of convergence but not on the uniqueness of the vanishing point; artists would not use space in a rigorously analytical way; they were not
able to measure it with clear mathematical precision. All considered, something really new happens around the middle of the 15th Century, and this novelty appears almost at the same time in different fields, in the material technological sphere as well as in the formal symbolic sphere (Perspective as Symbolic Form is the title of a celebrated essay by Panofsky). The actual events are different but homologically connected: the separate cultural vessels do communicate and the very same fluid circulates in the whole circuit. Naturally the time necessary to establish the connection, to bring the fluid to the same level, may vary; sometimes it takes decades to consent the full perception of an innovation in all the field of culture. To remain at the level of material media, it is certainly surprising to realize that for a very long period of time was lost by the Gutenberg machine. Many material sectors, such as transportation of goods or actual production of commodities remained based on muscular work (animal and human) for approximately three centuries, until the end of the 17th century when the communication machine was finally sided by homologous machines. This was the time of steam engines, when the Western world entered fully into the modernity of the industrial revolution.

We must admit that this enormous temporal gap between the inauguration of modernity (albeit at the sole symbolic level of communication) and an absolute modernity encompassing also the productive level, is indeed an embarrassing fact that puts the hypothesis of a unitarian interpretation in danger. Specifically, as we shall see later in detail, the imbalance appears to invalidate the turning point that text books set at around the year 1789, which we have accepted and reviewed as the point in which modernity turns into modernity. But how could one speak of modernity in 1789, if it is only at around this date that modernity comes to a full development with the introduction of "real" machines in the areas of transportation and production? We shall get to this in a while.

For the moment, in order to defend the hypothesis of a unified culture spanning from typography to steam engines, we should consider first of all the binding element established by the Gutenberg machine itself. To be sure, this never really changed its main functionality during the period in question, except for some minor technical ameliorations. And then, obviously, there is the homologous sister of the printing press, Renaissance perspective which, again, remains substantially the same till the complete realization of the mechanical industrial revolution occurred in the second half of the 19th Century. In other words, these are the constant unifying elements of four centuries of modern age; their synergism compensates for so many moments of emptiness or uncertainty which undoubtedly are present in this long stretch of time.

On the other hand, so many centuries do not pass without bearings; in this period both typography and Renaissance perspective exercise their quasi subliminal power of reshaping the totality of culture. It is not by chance that McLuhan's seminal work, The Gutenberg Galaxy, bears as subtitle The Making of Typographic Man, an expression which is difficult to translate in any language that would flatter the sense of progressive transformational action of the English participle. More recently, E. Eisenstein, confirming McLuhan's results with a detailed analysis of The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, also stresses the dynamic activity of the powerful medium in the very title of her essay.

We shall not miss the opportunity, at this point, to dispel the apparent excess of "finalism" one could detect in our discussion, as if we were indicating that all cultural channels proceed in synchronic accord in the same direction. On the contrary, resuming once more our useful analogy, not all containers are ready to receive the same fluid at the same time: some might be too closely connected to an old circuit or simply be obstructed at a certain point (as it happens when arteriosclerosis overcomes our vascular system), so that some sections need replacing or bypassing. And that, of course, takes time. Consider, for instance, the ambiguity which is rooted in the concept of Renaissance and which forbids a simplistic equation of it with modernity. Renaissance culture did not embrace wholeheartedly the innovation of typography: in point of fact, humanist scholars were committed against the modernism of the preceding pseudo-Aristotelian Thomist culture of the 14th century, when "barbarian" Latin was developed for clearer scientific communication. Renaissance men worked to resurrect the human side of science, and rhetoric was at the centre of their strategy for cultural transformation. Rhetorical communication, however, is based on the pre-eminence of the mouth-ear circuit, and therefore on actions taking place in front of a listener with the eloquence of spoken words. For this very reason humanists often stood decisively against the innovation of typography. For a long period of time, even after they had come to accept it, they basically ignored its essential properties by using the press for inadequate tasks, such as publishing classical authors' resounding speeches (Cicero's in particular) which were originally composed for acoustic fruition and not for silent reading.

In this regard, as is well known, McLuhan established the useful distinction between "cool" and "hot" cultures: in the first, the media involved favor a well balanced development of all sensorial channels (sight cooperates with acoustic properties, touch, movement, etc., on an equal basis); the sensorial integration may be so compact that in fact it would be difficult to distinguish the perceptual effects of each sense out of the harmonious combination. On the other hand, in "hot" cultures one sensorial channel prevails over the others bringing them to a state of atrophy, or amputation as McLuhan calls it. From this standpoint, the slow subliminal "Making of Typographic Man" which took place for hundreds of years was nothing but a process of cultural warm-up, i.e., a gradual predominance of sight over the other senses. Now, the humanists who had been interested in resurrecting the "cool" cultures of antiquity, based on oral communication, could not accept wholeheartedly the abrupt change of direction demanded by typography. The same ambiguous reaction can also be detected in visual arts. Art historians know well that after the inception of Renaissance perspective (Alberti, Masaccio, Beato Angelico, Paolo Uccello, etc.), artists did not make full use of the innovation. They did not apply it in depth and systematically; instead, they would use it when representing linear objects such as architectural structures. But for background, landscapes, a crowded assembly of people and so on
they would regress inevitably to late-gothic solutions emphasizing tactile and plastic values, bringing bodies to the foreground and flattening the total image. In this way, Renaissance perspective was applied with one stroke and denied with the next so to speak. We will have to wait till Leonardo da Vinci, born significantly in the years of typography (1452), to meet an artist capable of applying the innovative form in its entirety, with all its modern properties. He was able, in fact, to create the illusion of depth. Historically, however, Leonardo worked alongside contemporary artists (Botticelli, Perugino, Signorelli) who were unable to follow his path so that we will have to wait a few more decades, till the time of Michelangelo and Raphael, to encounter some artists capable of accepting modernity with all its pictorial implications. Early modernity had just established itself when it was confronted by the so called Manerists and this imposed another delay to the process of assimilation of modern principles. Such principles will make a strong reappearance in the following century, in Baroque art, but not without a tormenting dilemma: whether to embrace the "hot" values of visuality or the "cool" ones of acoustics and tactility.

Typography is commonly associated with Protestant Reformation: the believer is finally able to interact directly with the holy word, to read it in the solitude of his own room—a fact which not only reinforces the modern privilege of the printed medium over any other learning channel, but also encourages individualism. At this point the individual may well detach himself from the community he belongs to and to which he was bound by the necessity of oral learning. Orality, of course, constituted the only accessible learning channel to the crowd of illiterates. Here, again, we meet one of the many ambiguities of Renaissance culture, which blocks any simplistic attempt to equate it with modernity. In fact the spirit of the Renaissance probably favored the surge of Protestant Reformation; what is certain, however, is that the Renaissance consisted in a system of neo-ancient, neo-humanistic, resounding and magnanimous values developed by the two prominent classes (nobility and clergy), and that it was fiercely opposed by Protestantism and Reformed Churches. This forced the Catholic Church to react with a Counter-Reformation, which present studies have shown to resemble its declared opposite. It is indisputable that the Counter-Reformation promoted the cause of modernity, especially in the arts, preaching verisimilitude, naturalism, easy accessibility to the masses.

It is also common in current historiography to connect the new spirituality of the Reformation and a series of transformations in the ethical and political sphere. We already noticed how the process of silent reading, of learning via the print medium, leads to the individuality of modern man; he would now devote himself to a life of hard work trying to gain maximum profit. We have here, in brief, the well known conjunction of Reformation's effects and surging bourgeois capitalism even though at this stage capitalism does not have—and will not have for a long time yet—the proper tools for its developments, the steam engine machines. We witness, however, the appearance of a new class of individ-
the two spheres of juxtaposed values. In summing up, we realize here that the damage had occurred at the very beginning: once a culture relies on a technology destined to divide, break and analyze, restoration of unity is impossible. If the foundations are laid in a certain way the upper floors cannot elude that basic structure or, as an old saying goes, one cannot replace a horse after the race has started.

If we follow the hypotheses expounded by Cultural Historical Materialism, and particularly by McLuhan, we must come to recognize that the great transformation takes place when scientific research becomes aware of the power enclosed in electromagnetism, which eventually will be exploited by technology. Electricity as well as magnetism present a continuous nature: to study their effects, scientists will develop the most appropriate notion of “field,” which indicates that they do not flow in a gradual “one step at a time” fashion. The “movables” of the mechanics theorized by Galileo and Newton occupied successive points in their transfers, in such a way that it was possible to “set” them in a specific point of their path. Furthermore, the same criteria used for their identification in space were valid also for their placing in time, with the result, practically, that space and time in modern conception were equalized and measurable by homogeneous rules. On the contrary, electricity and magnetism occupy the entire field simultaneously, and it is not possible to follow the stages of their diffusion: they are entities which immediately pervade all the space and involve it in their action. Furthermore, they are fundamentally charged by an internal dialectic: positive and negative polarity in the case of electricity, and North and South in that of magnetism. Nothing similar can be found within the “bodies” or, in general, the res extensa of modern physics represented by homogeneous monolithic entities.

To be sure, electrical phenomena have been known for centuries; “electricity” comes from the Greek term “electron” which originally designated amber, a substance that generates the phenomenon of attraction-repulsion when rubbed. For centuries various students of “natural philosophy” had recorded discoveries and observations, sometimes very profound, concerning electrical phenomena. But it is only in the second half of the 18th century, particularly in the last quarter of it, that these inquiries become really intense, to the point of giving birth to the new discipline of electricity. Already in 1733, Charles François de Cisternay du Fay advances the existence of polarity (positive and negative) in electricity. And 1745 is the year of the Leyden bottle, which is basically a condenser, a device capable of storing electrical charges in detectable quantities. (With this technical innovation we reach a level of interplay between pure science and applied technology.) As anticipated, however, the sequence of discoveries is marked by a sharp acceleration around the end of the century: between 1785 and 1787 Coulomb is finally able to measure electric charges. At the same time, other researchers extended their probes into the area of animal electricity, first with experiments carried out by J. Walsh and, in the last decade of the century, by Luigi Galvani. Finally, in 1799 Alessandro Volta develops the first pile, later named after him (Voltaic pile), which is the first device capable of producing electricity. Here, again, we find ourselves in the intermediate stage between science and technological applications. What is certain, however, is that a new branch of physics is born in the heart of modernity, by a number of scientists including Galileo and Newton. These scientists had expounded a series of criteria that just would not work in the new area of studies. An anti-Newtonian revolt, then, was inevitable. It was supported not only by new scientists, but also by people whose interests ranged from philosophy to literature and who knew enough about science to perceive that the ongoing transformation reflected a dramatic change in the total cultural environment. A typical case in this regard is that of Wolfgang Goethe (1746-1832), who may certainly be viewed among the great founders of a new sensibility.

Following our methodology, which we have described with the summit of fluid distribution in a hydraulic network, we shall not limit ourselves here only to the containers of physics and technology. We shall recall, instead, that at the end of the 18th century the same fluid (the same cultural characters and principles) appears to be spreading in the “containers” of literature, fine arts and philosophy. Starting with the case of philosophy we soon meet Kant’s Copernican revolution, his Critique of Pure Reason. This is indeed the main avenue that allows the bypass of the navel dualities (subject-object, res cogitans-res extensa) afflicting modern thought. The a priori synthesis makes a whole system out of the two moments determined by consciousness and phenomenon (phenomenon being the image of the external world which appears in our consciousness). The two aspects, to say it in electric language, enter in a circuit and blend in simultaneous involvement so that it becomes useless to distinguish one from the other; and it is also impossible to establish time and procedure of the connection. This is instantaneously reached, as soon as “the switch is on,” just as in a normal electric circuit. Naturally, we could reject the homology of Kant’s epistemological revolution and the foundation of electrology, viewing any link between such distant vessels as dangerous and misleading, even in the consciousness of the people who experienced them. But then we would be left to wonder why Kant’s revolution happened in that particular moment in history.

The manuals of philosophy, however, are quick to specify that Kant’s framework brought with it a heavy passive residue. In fact, the simultaneous involvement he theorized concerned on the one hand subject and consciousness, and on the other hand not external reality but his “phenomenon,” which corresponds to its reflection in our sensitive faculties. With this Kant seemed only to have transferred a little further the dramatic modern fracture, without eliminating it completely. This limit could also be explained with the relative precariousness of the Königsberg thinker who was “born too soon,” in 1724, while most mature representatives of the new culture (such as Goethe) belonged to following generations. Subsequent philosophers would have to eliminate the division between the phenomenon and the thing in itself, which Kant called the nonomnon (the entity we may reach only with the mind without passing through sensorial experience). This elimination, however, according to the correct axioms of his general philosophy, is not admissible, and therefore the nonomnon becomes a purely
metaphysical entity, placed outside the world of experience. Why not renounce it altogether, then, and embrace a dynamic conception of subjectivity (or consciousness) considered as expanding energy, so that it creates its object in a unified and homogeneous process? This is exactly the step taken by Fichte and Hegel.

In electric terms, we could say that with Fichte and Hegel we pass from electrostatics to electrodynamics: the electric charges, instead of attaining a reciprocal equilibrium and keeping themselves in suspension, suffer from an unbalanced state which creates a flow, a "current of consciousness." Consequently, the new thought (philosophy, literature, visual arts) born in those years feels the need to have, at the beginning, an uncontrollable dynamic energy. Consciousness is an active principle to be conceived in terms of imagination and sensibility rather than intelligence. And since the latter had been framed within the schemes of Cartesian or Galilean-Newtonian reason, it is inevitable that imagination and sensibility would appear, in contrast, irrational. But they are not irrational at all if we consider them homologous with the new principles, with the new rationality that will be developed to comprehend electromagnetism.

Along this line we find Schopenhauer, the most acute and significant figure among Kant’s descendants. In a sense he systematizes the new reason, which in fact appears to him not as reason, but as a profound unconscious will, and therefore more powerful and decisive than the superficial conscious will obstinately linked with the old faculties of modern reason. Such faculties insist on being able to represent external reality by accepting the illusion that it is in fact external to us, and that our profound will does not affect its determination. The title of Schopenhauer’s chief work, _The World as Will and Representation_, perfectly indicates this overlapping coexistence of the two great cultural systems: the new one, with its emphasis on energy, fields of intensity and pervading power, grows in strength under the more superficial and external one. It is not by accident that Schopenhauer is considered an "epochal" thinker destined to reappear periodically in what we have called postmodern culture: From Nietzsche to Bergson, from Freud to Pirandello so many influential representatives of our culture refer to him (and if they do not explicitly they can plausibly draw the lines of connection).

The supremacy of consciousness as energy is also the basis of two contemporary authors, central figures in this cultural development: the already recalled Goethe, and William Blake (1757-1827). They anticipated Schopenhauer in declaring that "we" are first of all energy, impulse, profound will, even if the "we" is a victim of a long pedagogical tradition and would like to conform to a static conception of moderation and self control. We find in these authors the tension between the principles of pleasure and reality of which Freud will speak, between Id and Ego. The young Werther is moved by a flood of emotions he cannot control, by a primum which is not up for discussion, which is simply there just as is the electrical current in a circuit. And it is not a "thing," an external objective principle establishing its control over Werther’s subjectivity; the young man knows well that his urge to love Charlotte, inconsiderate as it is, is "him" with all his subjectivity unified in a single impulse.

At approximately the same time, William Blake says very similar, homologous, things with the "obscure" texts of his prophetic books. Like Goethe, Blake has no doubt of the supremacy of energy, which for him is expressed by visions, not rationalizations; his favored symbol is the tiger, an exuberant animal, in open contrast to the docile submissive horse. In terms of visual anthropological symbols, this principle of energy will be expressed by virile figures. Blake, of course, was not only a poet; he was primarily an engraver who illustrated books of various authors (e.g., Dante, Milton) as well as his own. From his pen and engraving tools came an entire graphic mythology centering on visions of a powerful young man called Los (a palindrome of "Sol," i.e., "Sun") or Orc (anagram of "Coe," i.e., "Heart"). Sun and heart indicate a manifestation of intense physical and psychic energies which would pertinently refer to the Son of God.

Blake, by virtue of another homology with electric phenomena, presents a process based on polarity: on the one hand there is the positive pole of Energy and Imagination, and on the other there is the negative pole of restraint, of the block represented by the old modern reason. He despises "Your Reason" (sounded in Uzigen), represented by an old, mighty but sterile, glacial man, ready to exercise all the repressive powers of the biblical God. We can see here how appropriate the association with Schopenhauer’s _World as Will and Representation_ really is.

Blake, who considered himself primarily an artist, worked fiercely against representation, which was central in the modern age. To represent implies that there is a reality out there which is heavy, static, completely defined without our contribution or, at the most, that our temperament acts as a mirror of the external world. What counts for modernity is a specular rapport, a patient analytical correspondence. Blake, instead, belongs already to the age of synthesis. To transfer reality piece by piece into its specular image on sheet or canvas does not make sense anymore. The act of perceiving no longer depends on the Renaissance single point of view, emanating his visual linear perceptual rays toward the external object. Now it is light waves, which in turn are of the same nature as electromagnetism with its well defined new properties: an extraordinary speed which practically corresponds to simultaneity and has the effect of "flattening" vision. Modern perspective would proudly emphasize the actual size of objects in sight and their reciprocal distance to give a sense of spatial depth. Exact linear measurements were so fundamental that the Western sensibility can be said to have been based on the assessment of weight and size, _mensura et pondus_. However, these parameters lose all of their relevance in the age of electromagnetism because quick and schematic outlines will suffice for the determination of the object. This is why all of postmodern art appears to be founded on abstraction, that is to say a stylization of form. Even before Paul Gauguin and his Pont-Aven School devised the plat theory, it was anticipated in Blake’s illustrations.
If through Blake the aspect of concentration appears predominant in an almost centrifugal effect, in another English artist born a generation later, William Turner (1775-1851), an opposite, centrifugal aspect is manifested. The electric charges can be condensed or dispersed in the cosmos where they form a tight network of power lines. In fact, Turner's seascapes, cityscapes, and landscapes appear to be informed by swirls, winding strokes and elliptical lines, as if the artist through atmospheric phenomena wanted to depict wave-packets, magnetic fields. Surely, nothing of this sort had ever been seen in previous landscapes.

Blake and Turner thus bring to the forefront two poles which repeat themselves in postmodern art until present times: 1) a centripetal movement that embodies, that underlines the centrality of structures and of Gestalten—either born "abstracted" from nature, or directly conceptualized by man as concrete elements (concrete art)—or, in dialectical alternative, 2) a centrifugal explosive motion that destroys static and surface elements trying to uncover primary energies by visualizing their engagement and genetic developments.

This second aspect is perhaps the more genuinely new since it finds complete legitimation in its homologous connections with the new electromagnetism of sources of energy. The other (centripetal, impulsive) aspect however, generates the important phenomenon of the retrieval of the past, a significant feature of postmodernity. Blake knew that his bare and "abstract" shapes were not an absolute novelty since they were practised already in the arts of the primitives. Postmodernity does not go beyond modernity and its canons; it also recovers some well known elements of pre-modern times. We have here a short circuit of gigantic proportions that associates present with remote past. What really matters is bypassing the age of conformity, of precise and analytical representation, opened by Raphael and his followers. So the new conception calls for a return to pre-Raphaeelite forms; this key-word was in the air a long time before the English movement founded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and friends in 1848. All the most significant artists (painters, sculptors, engravers, architects) operating in the last years of the 18th century follow two well defined complementary tendencies: they reject the world of modern representation based on verisimilitude, illusion and mimesis, and they establish a strategy of attention with respect to the pre-modern cycles (Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic). And when "new" systems of images that would go beyond the modern illusionism are not found, they would revive old systems defined in remote times—a phenomenon typical of that particular period.

Obviously one might object that such retrieval was not really a novelty. After all, what was the essence of the Renaissance between 15th and 16th centuries other than a revival of the ancient art of Graeco-Roman culture? But apart from the fact that the men of the Renaissance were rather unjust in the assessment of their own merits since their perspective was a largely original creation, they were moved by the conviction that they were following reason and returning to the true nature of man. The Renaissance was, after all, an enormous natural readjustment. The revivalism of the late 18th century, instead, implied the conscious breaking of a linear sequence, the subverting of an analytical concept of reason, going against common sense and imposing extravagant, polemical and even capricious choices.

For all of these reasons we can say that at the end of the 18th century we have a culture which is totally new. European scholastic manuals, as noticed, call it "contemporary" while we have decided to adopt, against common and equivocal usage, the more appropriate and powerful term, "postmodern." Clearly, the difference with respect to traditional historiography is not merely nominal. For the manuals date the passage from modern to contemporary at 1789, the beginning of the French Revolution; but this event must be considered totally extraneous to the series of events connected with the advent of electromagnetism, which for us represents the core of postmodernity. On the contrary, the French Revolution must be seen as perfectly in line with modernity: it firmly establishes and legitimates all those hard-won rights (freedom of expression, property and personal rights) of individuals in typographic culture. The Revolution was in fact a process of consolidation of ideological, ethical and philosophical principles already defined and subsequently enhanced by the changed conditions of the economy. The "immortal principles" of 1789 set the stage for the industrial economy in its process of development, with the help of machines employed in the production of goods as well as in the transportation of people and commodities. These new machines, working at the practical material level, confirm the pioneering innovations announced by typography and perspective. In other words, modernity was not at all exhausted at the beginning of the 19th century; it was actually ready to expand.

On the other hand, the culture we may consider as embedded in electromagnetism was still precariously weak. Our methodology, relying on Cultural Materialism, may just explain why. In those years electromagnetism could only count on some intuitions, mostly restricted to the sphere of high symbolic culture (physics, philosophy, fine arts, literature). The connections with technology and material culture were still rare and insubstantial; at the most, technology limited itself to supplying some laboratory tools for research in the new field. Decades had to pass before electronic technology would become conspicuous enough to penetrate the sensibility of ordinary people. In 1860-70 the applications of the new technology would have wide ranging effects, both at the electronic-mechanical level (with the Pacinotti ring, a "machine" at the core of the electric motor, capable of transforming electric power into mechanical work), and at the level of communication (with the setting of the first trans-Atlantic cable for telegraphic communication). From that moment there was a rapid escalation in the application of electricity to the field of information. The sequence started by the telegraph included telephone, radio (wireless telegraph) and finally, in the next century, television. In homologous correspondence with this triumphant march of both electro-mechanics and electronics (the two sides of electronic technology) we can witness the development of these contemporary art forms (postmodern, in our definition): Cézanne and Mallarmé, Gauguin and Seurat; Maeterlinck, Debussy and D’Annunzio; Picasso, Boccioni and Joyce; De Chirico and Roussel, and so on. With this development, modernity is in the last and most mature
phase of its cycle, recycling some accomplishments of great relevance. Consider, for instance, the exploitation of assembly line production and the embracing of Taylorism; the two, at the beginning of our century, bring to the highest degree of efficiency the mechanical industrial system—"heavy" industrialism. After the Second World War, in the Sixties, this system will demonstrate its vitality in the development of the so-called affluent society.

We have to realize that modern and postmodern, from 1789 to our day, confront each other like two motifs of a symphony which sometimes overlap but remain distinguishable to the expert listener; they show differences in accent and proportion so that the modern appears to be strong when the postmodern is weak and vice versa. The modern achieves a crescendo after a moment of hesitation at the beginning of the 19th century. It shows another at the end of the same century, but only to renew its far-reaching mechanical energy. The decline of modernity arrives only in the 1950s. Postmodernity, on the other hand, beginning, as we have seen, in an almost undetectable fashion between the 18th and 19th century, suffers a first blow after few decades of life, like an early spring vegetable surprised by unexpected frost, and then resumes its unstrained growth. Even the philosophical and literary climax of the late 18th century contained a certain ambiguity, since some of its distinctive elements could either develop in a postmodern fashion (in strong homology with electromagnetism), or simply be reabsorbed by the mechanical spirit of modernity. We have called attention to the faculty of imagination, noticing its substantial opposition to Rationalism and Enlightenment. It is exactly at this point that we register the major ambiguity of early modernity: on the one hand the move toward the faculty of imagination, inner energy and profound passion, indicated a decisive and irreversible new position (Blake and Goethe), or a process obstructed by the triumph of modernity with its emphasis on intellect and cold power of rationality (Schiller and the Italian poet Leopardi); on the other hand there was the possibility of a revival for the solution adopted by Leibniz and Vico, a solution which is in fact a compromise bearing some risks as we have noticed before. According to it, the age of imagination had to be confined in the realm of a mythical past, while present times would express maturity and Reason. This was the scheme adopted by Hegel in his coherent conception of extreme idealism and historicism. For him, in fact, a "death of the arts" was inevitable, as it was inevitable that the new, luminous, triumphal light of Reason would shine on the ruins of the age of imagination. He could defend himself, however, from the accusation of moving back to Rationalism, since his notion of Reason was based on concreteness, not on abstraction, and it was therefore able to absorb all preceding philosophical positions, including those reserved to sensibility. This, however, did not mean that that sensibility could be saved: it had to disappear in order to allow for the final triumph of Reason.

Afterwards, we have the well known overturning of Hegel's system developed by the Hegelian Left and by Marxism, which shifted the emphasis on the material strata of culture that had been totally annihilated by Hegel and other Idealist thinkers. The Hegelian Left and Marxism rendered explicit the modern foundations of Hegelianism. In fact, what for Hegel was the purely autonomous triumph of concrete Reason, was for the others a reality linked to economic factors (i.e., to the advent of "heavy" industrialism).

The scholars nourished by the principles of the Hegelian Left systematically reduced every cultural aspect to the powerful material structure. From this position two major movements are born, Positivism and Marxism. Both active around the middle of the 19th century, they did not differ much in their general perception of the situation; but mainly in their proposals for social advancement. For the Positivists, the supremacy of the productive machine had to be recognized, on the assumption that nature itself is a powerful machine, able to determine our sensorial faculties as well as our passion and will. In science, literature and fine arts the Positivists would devote their rigorous attention to study the "physiological machine" of man, on the fatalistic conviction that nothing could be done about the state of being other than to investigate it. For them the best one could was to face it in the most severe way possible, in order to avoid the obfuscation caused by emotions and feelings. The bourgeoisie, i.e., the category of successful individuals gifted by nature to sustain victoriously the struggle for life, had already obtained a full success. Nothing was left to writers and artists but to celebrate this triumph, as did Balzac in his "comédie humaine" and all the great realist-naturalist painters, from Gericault and Delacroix to Courbet and the Impressionists.

The Marxist cultural diagnosis was basically aligned along the same principles, but it implied a different program for action. For the Marxists it was clear that the central issue was the incoming great conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Historical Materialism, therefore, had to undergo a turn toward dialectics based on class confrontation. And since in Marx's perspective the horizon of modernity with its "heavy" industrialism appeared destined to remain unchanged, a call for action was directed to the proletariat, to assume control of the productive system. Marx did not anticipate the passage to a post-industrial system whereby the process of automation would free workers from repetitive and alienating jobs and expect an always more involving, intelligent and flexible role from them. A substantial transformation of technology would be followed by a radical redefinition of social classes, with the decline, and perhaps the disappearance, of proletariat. In other words, Marxism has been invalidated by the advent of post-industrialism (postmodernity in the area of production).

Something very similar was happening also in the area of the "high" symbolic values of fine arts and literature. The back-to-the-origin movement, with its revisitation of ancient art forms, generated two rather different cultural trends. On the one hand, as we have noted above, the most significant artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries would discover pre-Raphaelite forms. They felt a strong sympathy for archaic culture because its "abstract" and stylized figures anticipated postmodern art. On the other hand, the common revivalism was accompanied by a desire for accurate representation: far from
renouncing modern precision, some artists would make full use of it illustrating with vivid realism scenes from the Bible or from medieval history.

The reader might have noticed that we have neglected to mention the term Romanticism to designate the cultural climate of the time. The omission was intentional: the key term carries a fundamental ambiguity. Today we recognize as Romantic artists those who in fact regarded the term with a certain hostility, since they saw how the new ideas were rapidly being defeated by modern canons (i.e., exact illustrations, pseudo-scientific attitude, trust in progress). In the Italian literary debate on Romanticism, Giacomo Leopardi, who exalted imagination and "the infinite" in his lyrics, correctly rejected the self-proclaiming Romantics who attempted a modern reconstruction of historical scenarios. The most Romantic writer of Italian literature must be considered Alessandro Manzoni, author of the novel I promessi sposi in which he reproduces in a naturalistic fashion social events of 17th century Italy, adding a sociological analysis perfectly in tune with them. We could actually say that the Romantic artist of this modern kind aimed at a photographic reality both in literature and in visual arts. We should remember that photography was born in the third decade of the 19th century and soon became a powerful tool for experimental verification of the intrinsic validity of Alberti's Renaissance perspective. Photography is, in fact, a perfect "machine" for speculative representation of reality on flat surfaces where even the slightest detail is recorded. We know well that all canons of postmodern art will be contrary to this indifferent and passive process of reproduction which is basically the same whether it involves a photographic picture or an oil painting. In total opposition, stylized and "abstract" canons will be the common basis for postmodern art, from Cézanne onward, in line with the prophetic anticipations of William Blake and other late 18th century artists. Postmodern art will appear perfectly homologous to the electronic images of television, their common factors being discontinuity and limited resolution; in both cases shapes are stylized and flat, with no emphasis on details.

Nobody would deny that a decisive acceleration in the cultural process of transformation and renewal occurred in 1860-70. Textbooks refer to these times as "contemporary." Most scholars would call them "modern"; we use the term "postmodern," based on two assumptions. First, we shall verify that all chronological signals and criteria used by others since the arrival of the term "postmodern" are not sufficiently coherent. Second, we shall see that it is indeed necessary to go back to the end of the 18th century in order to find a reliable foundation for all the various aspects of postmodernism.

One of the most common turning points used for postmodernism is the major avant-garde movements in the second and third decade of this century. There are critics who would say, for instance, that some of these movements were "hard," and therefore modern, while others were "soft," which would make them postmodern. With this in mind, Cubism and all its derivates, such as Mondrian's Neoplasticism and Soviet Constructivism, would be referred to as "hard" and modern. Many protagonists in the field of architecture, who have developed these same premises, including Gropius, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and Frank L. Wright, are known as constituting the Modern Movement. All this would combine well with our criteria since the Cubists and their followers used a visual language based on mechanico-morphism. They painted as if they were working on a mechanical alternative to nature, considered wasteful and chaotic; they saw the tools of mechanical industrialism as capable of rebuilding the entire cosmos. This is, then, the triumph of the machine, which has to be recognized as the core of modernity. However, the historical avant-garde developed some radically different options: Kandinsky's biomorphism, later assumed by Miró and Masson, and the electro-morphism of the Italian Futurists who, following Marinetti, would not limit themselves to celebrate automobiles and airplanes, but paid attention also to radio and even x-rays. Given this situation, defining the first group modern and the second postmodern would appear justified. But here is where our standpoint allows for a useful clarification.

If we analyze a Cubist work we realize that it shows the effects of the Copernican Revolution (as Kant would say). The separation from Renaissance perspective could not be more complete, since the singularity of vision determined by both point of view and vanishing point has been rejected together with the Cartesian conception of hierarchical space. Now the different parts of the composition develop their potentiality in various directions in a free and autonomous way, with no possible restriction to a sole all-encompassing projection. The vision is dynamic, it spins around the objects denouncing the fact that the artist's perception happens in time and must be corrected by intellectual interventions which deny the supremacy of purely optical appearances. What is exhibited on canvas or wall is only an aspect of the total vision, almost a cover, a superficial blanket for internal organs. It was inspired, no doubt, by the language of mechanico-morphism, but this, it must be recognized after all, was the effect of a mistaken diagnosis of the culture of the time. Cubist artists obviously invested too much in machines and their future, failing to understand that they were immersed in the postmodern revolution. As for the link with the early age of postmodernism, a "necessity" for us, we shall recall that David's and Canova's drawings and sketches already announced extremely schematic forms dictated by a plastic language which rejected details and naturalistic contours.

When dealing with the pictorial language of biomorphism or, more specifically, the organicistic trend developed by Kandinsky and Miró, it is easy to establish the connection with the energetic expressions Turner had been capable of a century before. And even in Blake's drawings the centripetal movement of his figures was balanced by its opposite: the essential lines of his bodies are nuclei of a vision that emanates a flux of dematerialized energy.

Some critics would call genuinely postmodern those trends showing no concern for newly created languages but turning to old styles of the past and mixing them with criteria which recall oniric work. In this view the most credited postmoderns would be De Chirico in the arts and Rousell in the novel (not forgetting that De Chirico himself published an extraordinary novel of this kind, Ebdomeiros). This is also a device centered on a rejection of authenticity, which is replaced by established forms developed by other artists and usually associat-
ed with kitsch. This last term denotes a work of art that finds its identity recycling past successful works. It implies a certain lack of involvement on the part of the artist, as if he would renounce eating and digesting his own food, and prefer to absorb in a parasitic way that which had been digested by others. It is certainly a brave challenge: aiming at authenticity by means of the unauthentic, and it is also one of the typical characters of the present artistic scene. But how can we miss the fact that a similar position was already well defined a century before? Moving in and out of history on the edge of original creation and with the risk of pure and simple bad taste was typical of David, Canova and dozens of Romantic artists up to the Pompions. In many cases it is really difficult to distinguish between unredeemable kitsch and the very sophisticated genuine creation camouflaged by artists interested in recycling and assembling masterpieces of past ages retrieved from the museum.

Another starting point for postmodernity may be found in Dada. More radical than preceding movements, Dada is not limited to questioning the “internal” making and arranging of images or verbal sequences. It attacks the validity of the “external” and concrete structures which traditionally have constituted the physical supports of images and words: the canvas is rejected as well as the printed page in which words—made up by a combination of homogeneous characters—are lined up and set out in regular columns within the typographical “cage.” To be sure, this transgressive practice had already been established by the preceding avant-garde: Cubism had started the use of collage, an assembly on flat surfaces of real objects freed from illusory reproduction; Marinetti had dragged his Futurist friends along the creative path of *Tavole paraboliche* (Tables of Free(d) Words), probing also the territory of acoustic poetry (the revenge of the ear against graphic supremacy) which was to be busily travelled by the Soviet avant-garde. Later, Duchamp and his Dada group moved with great determination in this direction; he ended up recognizing that the artist does not have to produce with his own hands, but should limit himself to adding a mental label to objects and thoughts existing before him.

We must admit that in terms of “concrete” practice, such Dada operations are substantially new. Does that mean we can identify the elusive beginning of postmodernity with them? It is possible if we want to narrow our perspective to the events of art history in our century. But the premises of this decisive rejection of the Gutenberg galaxy, reaching the point of also renouncing its material products, were all in the ideal threshold of the 18th century. We have, in fact, assigned great relevance to Blake’s case for the coherence and globality of his ideas in this sense: he knew well that the separation of words and images, made inevitable by Gutenberg, was a disaster which generated the modern dissociation of our faculties. Blake’s work, then, blending on the same page words and images reconciled in a unified totality, was a gigantic effort to heal the wound inflicted by modernity.

Finally, it is fair to say that all the avant-garde trends of the early 20th century practiced their innovative principles in a scandal-mongering and paradoxical way. The artists were well aware that they represented the avant-garde; they felt detached from the masses which were still bound to modern prejudices; they were rather pleased with their isolation, dwelt on it, and refused to bridge the gap. In the late 20th century, however, all the avant-garde innovations we have considered enter a process of expansion leading to widespread normalization. The revolutionary positions of the historical avant-garde become largely acceptable and lose their scandal-mongering and elitist appeal. The artists, on the other hand, conscious of the impossibility of surpassing previous generations, limited themselves to applying their innovations in a capillary way. Do we want to use the term “postmodern” to indicate this post-2nd-World-War cultural environment of flattened extension, repetition and systematic occupation of previously discovered territories? Wouldn’t it make better sense to speak of the late phase of a complex but unified cultural process? After all, one dominant critical position equates postmodernity with late modernity, with an obvious confusion in terminology from our standpoint.

The fact remains that the most typical movements in the arts since the end of the 2nd World War show further developments of already established innovations. If we consider European Informel or American Abstract Expressionism, it is indeed difficult to miss the link with Kandinsky and the Miro-Masson Surrealism. If we look at the Beat Generation we see the revival of many Italian and Soviet Futurist elements. In the front of literature, we find the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Claude Simon: how can we avoid recognizing the link with Joyce’s interior monologue? To be sure, this narrative technique, in its passage from early to later applications undergoes a certain transformation: the normalization brings with it a tendency towards the flattening of emotions which shifts the emphasis from human protagonists to things, objects, and that is why that new device has been defined “interior monologue.” The normalization of early 1960s poetry also corresponds to a process of democratization, as Garcia Marquez’s works clearly indicate with respect to Faulkner’s more tragic creations; how can we deny the dependence of the former on the latter? And, again, once we cross the year 1960, consider the case of the so-called *nouveau-nouveau roman* (Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon and Jean Ricardou strengthen the plot line in their novels, bringing them to an extreme level of complexity as if they were complicated chess games). How can we forget that these artificial creations, coolly rationalized as if they were produced with the help of a computer, were anticipated by Raymond Roussel? Robbe-Grillet, a lucid self-critic, articulated a rather ironic and witty formula saying that his own derivation from Husserl may be overturned by an almost perfect anagram in Roussel. In other words, the phenomenological attitude towards reality, or, more accurately, in Husserl’s terms “the return to the things themselves,” intertwines with complex plots challenging the kitsch, as Roussel intended. Also in the work of an author bound to postmodernity like Italo Calvino we have to look back in time for sources of inspiration: Jarry’s Pataphysics or intermediate figures (between early and late 20th century) such as Raymond Queneau and the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (*Oulipo*).
The Sixties were the last years of the triumph of industrialization, with unprecedented affluence. A levelling of the social classes would follow consumerism, which gave rise to the phenomenon of Pop Art. The goods themselves are celebrated but in stylized ways of great elegance with precedents in Gauguin or in Seurat, forerunners of the two large families of technics for image making: an abstract shaping, leaning of fields of synthetic colors which are the basis of affiche cartoons and strips; or turning to an assembly of minute and discrete elements, similar to the typographic mesh and the pixel—the picture element in the electronic mosaic of television language.

Against this world of closed and stylized images dear to Pop Art, that in turn is connected with the popular and folkloric abstraction practiced by Blake, Gauguin and Seurat, stands the art born around 1968 which retrieves the “open” practices of Duchamp and other Dadaists. However, even in this case we are dealing with a program of systematic extension, entrusted to movements such as the “happenings,” Fluxus, Anti-Form, Land Art, Body Art. Certainly we do not pretend that such movements lack an individual and peculiar raison d'être (they actually reflect very well the sense of the time that has produced them). We simply want to specify that it is not possible to understand adequately these movements unless we see them as part of a strongly unified general process.

Finally, in dialectic reaction to the extreme, “explosive” phase of the tendencies above mentioned (also referred to as “de-definition” or “de-materialization” of art), an opposite movement, “implosive,” is born in the Seventies and in the early Eighties, that takes back the techniques of De Chirico, Magritte and Dalí who quoted older pictorial forms, occasionally in explicit bad taste or overt kitsch, trying to assert their value in a homeopathic manner (as some poisons that taken in small doses can become beneficial and overturn the negative effect). But even this is a rebound which stems not only from certain avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, but also from the Revivalism of the 19th century; and therefore, once more, we must turn to our two-century retrospective. To do so is a necessary condition to understanding postmodernity, and it is also a sufficient one. Both the energetic explosion towards the future and the recovery of the past find their common beginning in the cultural environment of late 18th century and not before. The search for the roots of our postmodern condition stops there.

Translated by Francesco Guardiani