

Christopher Crouch



# Modernism in Art, Design and Architecture

CHRISTOPHER CROUCH



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C.C.

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This book is about the ideas that lie behind images and objects of the twentieth century, more than it is about the images and objects themselves. The practice of making images, of making objects, of exploiting the visual, goes far beyond the act of manufacture important though an understanding of materials is. Practitioners, whether artists, designers or architects, need to understand how their culture works in order to communicate successfully to their audience. Unless those engaged in acts of communication, in this case visual, understand the expectations of their audience, unless they have carefully considered who their audience might be, unless they are aware that they are in fact engaged in a complex dialogue, then the objects they create will have resonance for themselves but not necessarily for others. Practitioners cannot afford to work in an intellectual vacuum; to do so would be to undermine the power of their work to communicate to others. Architects, designers, photographers and artists all work in a culture that conforms to certain ideological principles (sets of governing ideas) which determine the way in which objects and images are both presented and understood. Only by understanding the context in which they are working can visual practitioners make complete sense of how they fit into the culture that surrounds them. Only by understanding the culture that surrounds them can they communicate ideas about it - and their perceived place in it - to others.

Equally, just as it is important for the producers of culture to understand their environs, so too the consumer of their images needs to be conscious of the complexity and depth of their cultural surroundings. How we view our past, as well as how we view our present, are important parts of the cultural communication process. We are connected by intellectual threads not only to what is happening around us, but also with what happened in the past, and the way that it colours the present. History undergoes constant and continual revision by all cultures. Things that were once considered beautiful change their value and are deemed ugly, and vice versa. The bronzes of Benin, once considered curiosities of a primitive African culture,

are now more highly valued aesthetically than the products of the imperial British culture that originally consigned them to the museum of ethnography rather than the art gallery. The megalomaniacal paintings of Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany are seen as ridiculous now that the cultural structures that originally ascribed them with value have disappeared. Throughout the twentieth century advocates of abstraction and figuration in painting have conducted ideological skirmishes in the pages of specialist journals and in the mass media. Similar debates continue still, for conceptions of history are part of a culture's ideological structure, and help define the present.

Historical views and interpretations are presented and confirmed by writers on art and design, some of whom are artists themselves. These views are often presented as 'truths', incontestable facts, observations that are the result of total objectivity. The interpretative views of such writers can confirm or deny the importance of cultural artefacts in a culture. In this way a single individual can determine the way that large sections of a consuming audience understand their culture by acting as mediators between them and cultural information and the producer practitioners' artefacts. It is arguable that cultural values and expectations are too important to allow other people to intercede between us and the objects and images of art and design, too important for us to see them always as second-hand, pre-digested things; for this is what happens when we rely on other voices who have access to the 'truth' to tell us how to understand things. This is why this book has been written - to explain how ideas have evolved in the hands of writers and practitioners of the visual arts in the twentieth century, and to provide a path through the tangle of ideas for those who are strangers to them.

This is an introductory text; it makes generalisations, and the route it plots through the ideas associated with the art and design of the past hundred years is just one of many that would take the reader in pretty much the same direction. There is simply too much information to cram into a book this size – its particular version of history is as suspect as any of the sets of ideas I take to task in the following chapters. But, hopefully, by acknowledging that I have shed much detail in order to provide a graspable version of Modernism for the reader, the information that I provide can be seen as a simple guide to the territory, and not as its definitive mapping. Many artists and designers and architects have been left out of my text, and no doubt their exclusion will cause much bewilderment, and some looks of

astonishment. All I can say is that this is one version of the facts, and there are many more. I have tried where possible to refer to works that are readily tracked down by the reader new to the subject, and from what I have already said it should be clear that this book is simply a first guide to other reading and has no pretensions about standing on its own.

I have used a number of terms in the book that need some explanation for the reader new to the debates that are to follow. I have tried to keep jargon to a minimum but it is impossible to talk about the issues that are discussed without some sort of specialised vocabulary. Of all the terms that are used *ideology* is probably amongst the most important (and perhaps difficult for those introduced to it for the first time). I have used the term to describe sets of cultural ideas that are held by certain groups. Ideologies are those sets of ideas that are socially assumed and which cannot be objectively tested. The word describes the form of thought that reflects a social consensus or belief. Dominant ideologies both reflect and mould the thinking of an individual or a society. If we can understand how sets of ideas – ideologies – are formed, and used, then an understanding of the effect they have on cultures is much easier to understand, and, if the reader is a practitioner, to modify.

It is the case that the world of ideas can be divided into two. There are those ideas which are testable against the material world, which are objective; and those which cannot be tested - ideologies - which are subjective. Some ideas emerge from practical, material, circumstances. These objective ideas can be tested against a reality. So, the grower of roses will learn about roses and their cultivation as he grows them, testing out new fertilisers, changing watering patterns, pruning and transplanting. The ideas he has about how to grow roses successfully comes from his store of knowledge based on his practical experience. These ideas can be tested practically; if the rose grower's ideas about the cultivation of roses is wrong, then they don't grow. But there are other sets of ideas about roses, about how they should look, about which colours are the most beautiful, about which has the most exquisite scent. These ideas cannot be tested, for they are subjective, related to sets of ideas which are formed through a group consensus. The more people adhere to these ideas the stronger (and more dominant) the suppositions become, and the more real they appear to be. It is these ideas, that are connected to the material world but which are at the same time at one remove from it, that we can characterise as being ideological.

In culture, ideology permeates everything. Art and design are based on many untestable suppositions – the most obvious being that of the idea of beauty. It is impossible to measure beauty, impossible to devise a 'beautometer' that can be held up to images and objects, to watch the needle twitch and observe, 'yes! that's got some beauty in it!' All we can hope to do is to identify the sets of ideas that stimulate artists and designers to make things the way they do and, in design particularly, to distinguish function (the practical aspect of an object or building) from ideology (its principles of styling). Ideology also influences the cultural context in which ideas are permitted and in which images are read. What is acceptable to one culture is not necessarily acceptable to another. This is the basis of censorship, the ideological policing of ideas. Ideas about race, gender, sexuality and identity are all ideological, all of them are culturally constructed, none are fixed and all are open to critical interrogation.

If we understand ideology then we can understand the relation of ideas to the material world, and separate that which is objective from that which is subjective. If we are able to do this, either as producer or consumer then we are freed from all sorts of intellectual constraints. However it is not enough to understand that ideologies exist. If we are to develop a critical understanding of ideology, we must consider how it operates structurally in a society.

The society in which the artist and designer work can be split into two parts; the cultural superstructure and the economic base. These two parts are intertwined in varying degrees, and both are straddled by the artist and designer. The economic base is the foundation upon which a society is built. The more sophisticated and developed a society's economy is, the more surplus cash that it produces for groups of people within that society and the more likelihood that there is a variety of art and design. This ability to produce consumable things does not mean that all affluent societies necessarily produce art and design that is successful either morally or visually, simply that a surplus of spendable money from the economy goes into the production of luxury items which have an ideological value rather than a practical use. The ideological values that are ascribed to the artefacts produced within the economic base are debated in the cultural superstructure. This phrase 'cultural superstructure' describes the set of ideas that give order to and interpret a society and its objects. The 'cultural' in cultural superstructure refers to all the ideas and artefacts that a society uses to communicate, so it is not just 'high' art like the opera which is culture, but all means of communication,

such as television, film and magazines. It is mainly in the cultural superstructure that the artist exists, dealing as he or she does primarily with ideas. The artist is dependent upon the economic base though, because a subsistence economy of whatever sort cannot afford the time that the luxury of aesthetic and cultural debate requires. The designer works primarily in the economic base, designing or making objects which can be commodified – for example, page layouts for magazines or buildings. The designer is also subject to the ideological pressures of the cultural superstructure that determine what is acceptable in the styling of consumable objects. This relationship can either enrich or denude the designer's practice depending upon their understanding of such ideological issues. We shall be looking at this phenomenon in more detail in the main body of the book where we examine buildings and cars and the way their appearance moves between the ideas of function and styling. The cultural superstructure and the economic base interact with one another in varying degrees, at varying times, in varying cultures. This will become evident as we progress with our cultural examination of the twentieth century.

The core of cultural ideas which this book will examine are those sets of ideas which are collectively known as Modernism. We shall only be looking at the effect of Modernism in the visual arts, although they were evident in many different intellectual disciplines. The origins of Modernism can be traced back to the development of scientific thinking in seventeenth-century Europe during the process we now identify as the Enlightenment, and came to an identifiable focus in the middle of the eighteenth century when the processes of industrialisation transformed the nature of the economic base in Britain. At the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, Modernists wished to break with past traditions and to set cultural agenda for the future. They privileged the idea of progress before any other, whether they were economists, chemists or designers. Our contemporary society is still in the process of coming to terms with the consequences of this century's cultural experimentation based around these ideas.

From its beginnings as an intellectual force for cultural change, there was a fundamental contradiction in Modernism. On one hand it was transgressive (it broke established cultural paradigms or rules) and argued for the emancipation of the individual from the oppression of industrialised society, while on the other it often promoted this act of liberation through a culture of technological control by

uniformity and collaboration. These two seemingly opposing attitudes could very well be held simultaneously by any individual as we shall see as the book progresses. At the core of this conceptual dilemma is the relationship between those who privileged the individual voice and those who valued the collective voice. This dialogue between the 'individual' and the 'universal' is a recurrent theme throughout the twentieth century, represented at its crudest in the ideological struggle between the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, during the Cold War.

To discuss Modernist culture without an understanding of the political history of the times is difficult. This book's size does not allow a retelling of history, but an understanding of it is necessary. Modernism emerged from European thought, supplemented though it was by ideas and artefacts from other cultures acquired through trade and war. During the period of this book's investigation, from the end of the nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century, Europe has been at constant war within its boundaries. The three big imperialist powers, France, Britain and Germany, have been engaged not only in colonial struggles throughout the period but also in two major European wars that became global struggles for power - the First World War of 1914-18 and the Second World War of 1939-45. These wars resulted in a shift of global power as the European nations exhausted themselves with military spending and confronted the military devastation of their urban communities and fabric. In Europe, between the wars, a number of forms of totalitarianism emerged. In 1917 the Russian Communist Revolution promised a socialist utopia. Its socially progressive, radical years were short-lived. Torn by civil war and the intervention of British and American troops, the young Soviet Union became a totalitarian society under the heavy hand of Joseph Stalin's Communist Party. Mussolini's Fascist Party in Italy and Hitler's Nazi party in Germany completed the set of European totalitarian states in the 1930s, their obsession with uniformity and cohesiveness a disturbing off-shoot of the Modernist utopian dream of a universalist society.

The post-Second World War years saw the preeminence of the United States as the global military power, engaged in an arm's-length, armed ideological struggle with the Soviet Union in countries like Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Angola and Nicaragua. This period came to an end in the late 1980s as the former Communist states of Eastern Europe dismantled their old totalitarianism and embarked on the investigation of other cultural structures.

The centre of economic power, as opposed to military power, now lies in the countries of Asia. It is here (or 'there' depending on your global position) that the powerhouse of industrial production lies and where, it appears, it will remain for some time. This shift away from the North American/European axis has been further hastened by the growth of transnational corporations whose annual budgets exceed those of many nation states. This phenomenan is creating a new dialogue about cultural and national identity as the world loses the old eurocentric colonialism, only to discover another: the economic colonialisation by global businesses that casts further shadows on the relationship between the cultural superstructure and the economic base, between producers and consumers of culture.

As we have just seen in our brief look at ideology, ideological premises are not stable things. This is why an understanding of the relationship between the cultural superstructure and the economic base is essential to an understanding of Modernism. The arts were seen by Modernists as not only reflecting the world around them (this was a radical departure in itself, in a world where the arts often provided, as they still do, an escape from reality), but also helping to alter the structure of society. Artists, designers, photographers, filmmakers and architects often worked alongside one another in declared agenda of social action. This was to make the Modernist age an age of manifestos. Manifestos and their ideas emerge from physical conditions, and because of this they sometimes lose their relevance as conditions change. This has been the case with the ideas of Modernism. Ideologically we now live in a postmodern society. This lived reality alters our perception of Modernist ideas. As the industrial society of Europe has changed into a post-industrial one, as industrialisation proceeds elsewhere in the world, and as the mass media become increasingly powerful in moulding the consciousness of large groups of people, so then the ideas of the first part of the century become slowly irrelevant. These important new, contemporary circumstances will be examined in the later chapters of this book.

The ideas of Modernist designers in the first part of the century who saw good design as emulating the functionality of the machine, have been superseded by contemporary ideas that encourage a constant change in the appearance of designed goods to stimulate consumer demand. Whereas the Modernist designers thought that industry could be used to further Modernist ideology (that the economic base could be fundamentally altered by the cultural superstructure), contemporary transnational industry has simply used the

designer to perpetuate its own values. In a similar process of ideological change, the wider ideas of the Enlightenment and of the Industrial Revolution, the radical and often destabilising contributions to shaping the modern world from individuals like Marx and Freud (whose ideas will be examined more closely in subsequent chapters) become absorbed into the mainstream of cultural life. The absorption and mutation of once revolutionary ideas now pose new problems of interpretation.

In contemporary culture not only are the ideas of Modernism being revised, but new material conditions and their new technologies create their own particular issues that need investigation. One obvious example is the way in which progress in the new electronic technologies, and the related creation of an information society, is placing new demands on artists and designers. This new culture is different from the old industrial/Modernist culture but has emerged from it. It is therefore a postmodern culture. Initially Postmodernism differed from Modernism in that it had no agenda, no declared set of aims for the future, no programme for cultural action. Some Postmodernists saw themselves in opposition to the ideas of Modernism, others as developing them. In some ways the confusion of the late nineteenth century, from which the attempt to construct a Modernist society emerged, is duplicated in the mainstream work of the late twentieth century. Confronted with new conditions, with potential ideological chaos, artists and designers often retreat into the stylistic security of a nostalgic past. We find ourselves at a juncture in our cultural development where Modernist ideas are no longer sufficient to help explain and reflect the complexity of what is going on around us.

The Modernist period was the period of the avant-garde. This is a phrase used to describe the idea of an elite within the intelligentsia who were to force the pace of cultural change. We have already established that the agenda of Modernism was cultural and social transformation. The preparation for this transformation was the task of the avant-garde. Part of the avant-garde's activity was the transgression of the paradigms of existing society. The contemporary plethora of information in wealthy postmodern societies, and the multiplicity of different cultural forms available to us, means that it is more difficult than previously to break cultural paradigms. The artist and designer have an increasing range of cultural forms from which to choose. If all are valued equally then a culture of multiple choices negates the early twentieth-century model of cultural and social

transformation. How is it possible to transgress when everything is permissible?

The reality is that even within this Western culture of choice, privileged by economic prosperity and fuelled by consumerism, some cultural issues which were raised by Modernist thinkers remain unresolved. Design still has not resolved the problem of the relationship between function and style, and the relationship between the individual and the collective culture he or she lives in is still undefined. Whilst it may be clear that the methods of Modernism were unable to resolve these issues, and in the later chapters of this book we shall examine why this was the case, there *is* a cultural cutting edge outside the mainstream of postmodern work. Out on this edge are artists and designers working with issues of gender and sexuality, with notions of cultural identity, and with environmental design. It is on this cultural body of investigation, rather than the Postmodernism of the economic base, that the future's cultural experiments will stand or fall.