

## **We Have Always Been Modern**

Anne BOISSIÈRE

**What does it mean to be modern? Is the modern era over, as proponents of post-modernism claim? Flying in the face of conventional definitions, Pierre-Damien Huyghe defends a conception of the modern based on the transformative power of technology, which has always been a characteristic of man.**

Reviewed: Pierre-Damien Huyghe, *Modernes sans modernité, Éloge des mondes sans style*, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009. 128 p., 14 €.

In theoretical and practical terms, the purpose of Pierre-Damien Huyghe's book is to give a definition of the modern based on what the author contends is the intrinsic relationship between art and industry, a relationship hitherto ignored both by those who think about art in the specialized realm of aesthetics and by those who study contemporary society and its post/hyper-industrial development from the standpoint of sociology and the history of technology and science. In other words, Huyghe continues and extends his investigation of art as a technical activity, and it is from this angle that he launches a new attack on the problem of the modern. His approach is all the more noteworthy for its ambition to free itself from the modern/post-modern alternative.

### **Modern Being**

The main thrust of Huyghe's meditation is to promote a conception of the modern which, on the one hand, applies to the present era (and is therefore strenuously critical of the idea of "postmodernity") and, on the other hand, parts company with historical approaches that see

modernity as an era<sup>1</sup> of which we are, in one way or another, the heirs. Although he criticizes post-modernity, he does so on the basis of arguments that do not depend on what we traditionally view as modernity, including philosophical modernity. In particular, Huyghe takes a strong position vis-à-vis the work of Fredric Jameson.<sup>2</sup> Although he acknowledges his debt to Jameson, particularly in regard to his case-study method (first chapter), he suggests that the American critic's approach, which is linked to critical theory, assumes a relationship between art and the social that does not fully satisfy him: in particular, it fails to question the irreducibility of making in art (as any aesthetic approach to the idea of modernity will, no matter how critical) and therefore lacks the kind of differentiated concept of industry that would make a theory of apparatuses possible (last chapter). The idea of a relationship between art and technology, such as the one Walter Benjamin developed in the case of photography, is powerfully present though not much elaborated, and it is wielded against Marxist approaches that allegedly conceive of the relationship between art and the social and art and technology in terms that rely too much on unmediated representation.

An important feature of Huyghe's book is therefore its willingness to take a fresh look at the idea of modernity as envisioned in the Enlightenment concept of aesthetics as a field of knowledge, and in general the use of a broad sense of the aesthetic. One finds a similar idea in Bruno Latour's formula, "We have never been modern," which Huyghe counters with another formula of his own, condensing his thesis in a pithy manner: "We have always been modern" (p. 90). The point here is not to enter into a point-by-point critique of the sociologist but rather to propose a concept of the modern that is neither chronologically defined nor beholden to any particular philosophy of history but is rather based on the transformative and expressive power of technology, a power possessed by men of all ages. The author also aims to refute, once and for all, the idea that the modern somehow corresponds to an absolute beginning, an idea that traces its origin, in the philosophical realm, to Descartes's notion of the *tabula rasa* and rejection of authority (p. 56). Huyghe labels this type of thinking "modernism" and distinguishes it sharply

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<sup>1</sup> An era, moreover, whose beginning and end are assigned different dates by different disciplines.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991; *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2007.

from what he means by “modernity”: not a period, not an absolute beginning,<sup>3</sup> but a way of being in the world: “Modern actually means ‘to modify’, to affect ‘modes’ of existence, to produce new aspects” (p. 90). The presupposition or underlying hypothesis of this definition is “the practical affirmation of the incessant effort of our essential technicity” (p. 91).

### **Worlds without Style**

In this perspective, the thesis of the modern is linked to a dimension of the human, which, though not an essential or, *a fortiori*, a metaphysical quality, nevertheless always exists, manifesting itself in what is called “technical activity” (*conduites techniques*). The author does not seek to develop an abstract theory of technical activity. Rather, he wants to explore what he regards as the privileged realm of art, not, as in traditional aesthetics, in the sense of “fine art,” but rather in the sense in which art is an activity of making and therefore always implies an operative dimension that cannot be reduced to an image, representation, or signification. A crucial aspect of his approach in this book is therefore to recover this active aspect of art, this dimension of making or doing (including the use of mechanical apparatuses and techniques of reproduction as in photography, film, radio, etc.), insofar as it contributes to “man’s power to modify the conditions of his existence” (p. 22) and therefore to the modern. In the last chapter of his book, Huyghe gives a concrete account of this power in his discussion of Steve Reich’s “Pendulum Music,” based on Dan Graham’s commentary in “Subject Matter,” but his overall approach is primarily to insist on the tensions that exist in the active dimension of art as well as on the many ways in which this dimension is covered up or hidden. There is, first of all, the problem of discourse on art and works of art, which introduces and even gives primacy to meaning or interpretation, and ultimately to what art “says,” when the real problem is to conceive of what it “does.” This tension is particularly apparent at the phenomenal level: technical activity shows but does not tell. But what really sets this book apart from the author’s earlier work is his analysis of “style,” with all its implications for the central issue of modernity. Using Viollet-le-Duc’s reflections on Gothic style in contrast to the Romanesque (p. 73-81), he

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<sup>3</sup> It should be said that the definition of the modern that Huyghe attacks is not as self-evident as he seems to think. Consideration should perhaps be given to the arts. In music, for example, one might see the avant-garde as the equivalent of the *tabula rasa* while arguing that modernity builds upon a definite relationship with tradition. That said, what is original about Huyghe’s approach is above all his effort to introduce the idea of technical activity into the debate.

seeks to show that style in art corresponds to that moment of covering up: when the logic of the idea or concept (the style) supplants the logic of making or doing, which has no *a priori* representations or models to organize or develop itself. Romanesque architecture, whose capitals are highlighted in the analysis, is thus depicted as an example of a world without style, distinguished by “the banishment of concepts” (p. 85). But this banishment does not leave the Romanesque impoverished. On the contrary, it is modern in its technical activity and, most important of all, open to the promise inherent in the act of making.

### **We, Moderns**

Pierre-Damien Huygue’s book is a committed work of scholarship: his purpose is to pass judgment on our era (p. 87), in the hope that future generations may avail themselves of the possibility of the new. It is not just another interpretation of the present age but an attempt to see it in relation to, or in resonance with, other eras, especially the Middle Ages. If modernity is indeed ours — the modernity of world without style in which the active schema is dominant — then we need to be able to see it in relation to the experiences of other eras. Thus the boldness of Huygue’s essay lies in the comparison with the Middle Ages, which figures especially in the thesis of chapter 3 (“Critique of Interest”) concerning homage and fealty: “In a general sense, the regime of fealty is at stake in modernity” (p. 55).

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr). Translated from French by [Arthur Goldhammer](#) with the support of the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme.

Published in [Books & Ideas](#), 26 November 2010.

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