

Chapter Five: The End of Humanism

5.1 Introduction

When studying the last six hundred years of western history, one may readily summon the impression that Europe has always been on the rise. Such feeling was probably originated from the spectacular economic achievement, steady advances in technology, and the constantly improving human right condition. After all, when compared with the stagnant and poor “Middle Ages”, it is difficult not to concede that Europe has been making substantial progresses ever since.

Yet such linear pattern of progress only applied to the development of technology and material life in general, as the history of spiritual life told a very different story. Roughly speaking, since the arrival of Twelfth Century Renaissance until the dawn of the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century, the interest in spiritual life and human nature exceeded the interest in rational and material life. In those days, the ideal man was one with a cultivated spirit, while intelligence only occupied a secondary position. That was the heyday of humanism.

Things turned to the opposite direction with the coming of the Enlightenment Age. With the enormous success of Newtonian science, all of a sudden, intelligence and rationality superseded moral virtues as the ideal qualities to acquire. The traditional humanist concern of human nature and spiritual life was on the brink of collapse. Fortunately, some farsighted individuals noticed the menace on humanism and vigorously launched a protest known as Romanticism, thereby slowing down the spreading of the scientific method.

Nonetheless, starting from the mid nineteenth century, Romanticism began to lose steam, as with all other movements in

history. A new movement known as Modernization or Modernism quickly took over the entire European society. Mid-nineteenth century was the real beginning of our age.

5.2 Impressionism and the Modern Age¹

It is almost unnecessary to recount here the well-known economic, diplomatic and political history of Modern Europe, as books falling into this category abound in bookstores. It is rather the mentality of Modern people that shall be the focus here. The making of the Modern mind was itself a complex phenomenon composed of many factors. Yet perhaps the most important amongst the myriad factors was the revived faith in the scientific interpretation of our world, which took its lesson from the Romantic protest and consequently looked quite different from the genuine Cartesian method. Other crucial elements like the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of urban life in megacities also had an effect on the shaping of Modern spirit.

¹ The following secondary source materials have been consulted for this section: Arnold Hauser, *Naturalism, Impressionism, the Film Age*, vol. 4, The Social History of Art (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968); Phaidon Press, *The Art Book* (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2001); Bernard Denvir, *Impressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974); John Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*; C. W. Crawley, ed., *War and Peace in an Age of Upheaval: 1793-1830*, vol. 9, The New Cambridge Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); J. P. T. Bury, ed., *The Zenith of European Power*, vol. 10, The New Cambridge Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); F. H. Hinsley, ed., *Material Progress and World-wide Problems, 1870-1898*, vol. 11, The New Cambridge Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); S. Pollard and C. Holmes, eds., *Industrial Power and National Rivalry*, vol. 2, Documents of European Economic History (London: Edward Arnold, 1968); John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946); James A. Winders, *European Culture since 1848: From Modern to Postmodern and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave, 2001);

Revived faith in science, Industrial Revolution, as well as urban life all readily gave rise to the impression of dreadful sophistication. Indeed, approaching these serious topics front-to-front may render the process to understand the Modern mind tedious, thereby turning potential readers away. Thus, it is preferable to tackle these issues by utilizing the technique proposed in this book: using art as the mirror of the human spirit.

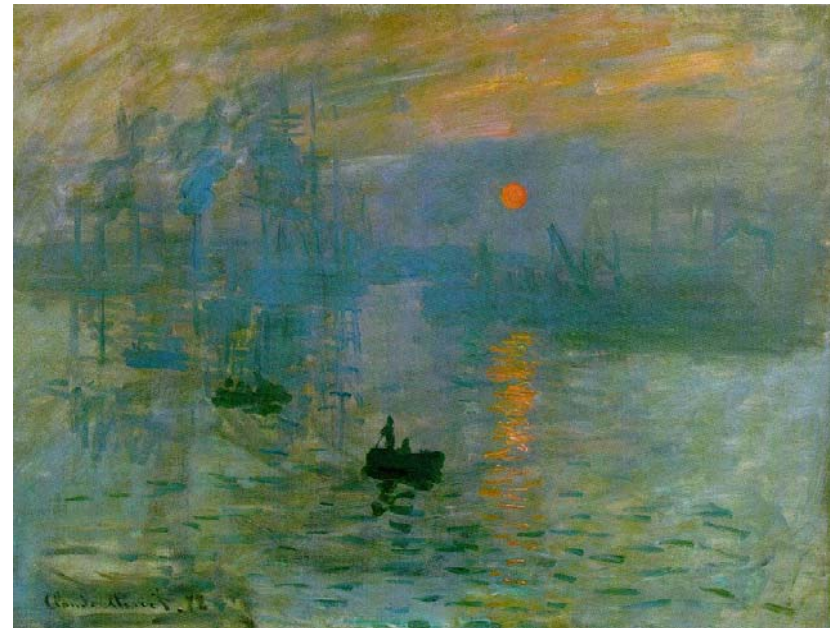
5.2.1 Monet and the Beginning of Impressionism

In the second half of the nineteenth century, painting became the leading art. After the predominance of literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the leading part played by music in the Romantic Age, a change in favour of painting occurred about the middle of the nineteenth century. Painting dominated all other arts not only as the most progressive and dynamic art of the age, but its productions also surpassed contemporary literary and musical opuses quantitatively. For this reason, it is best to look at paintings when studying Modern art.

No doubt that painting was the most progressive art of the Modern Age. Until somewhere in 1860s, the leading trend in painting was undoubtedly Romanticism. From then on until the end of the Second World War in 1945, however, Romanticism quickly ceded its dominant position to a series of short-lived artistic movements. This included a long list of -isms like Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Kinetic Art, Vorticism, plus many other smaller ones. It is of course impossible to cover each of these so-called “avant-garde” movements in great details here. Instead, for the purpose of this section, it suffices to take a closer look at the pioneer of all these Modern arts: Impressionism, no doubt the most important thing that had happened in European art since the Renaissance.

Let’s take a look at one of the most important Impressionist paintings entitled *Impression: Soleil Levant* or *Impression: Sunrise* by Claude Monet (1840-1926). Monet painted this picture of the sun seen through thick mist at the harbour of Le Havre when he was staying there in the spring of 1872. Unlike all other painters preceded him, neither did he depict this scene as appeared to his primordial vision, nor did he use his opus to study human nature. Instead, he merely sought to capture the immediate optical impression of the scene as received by his sensory organ in that particular dawn. Moreover, figures on the canvas appeared distorted because only a few significant details were made to represent an entire object, leaving it to the mind of the observers to fill in additional details. At first glance, this technique made the entire work to look unnatural.

Figure 5.1: Monet’s *Impression – Sun Rise*



In 1874, Monet exhibited his painting in the first exhibition of a newly created society known as *Société Anonyme des Artistes-Peintres* or *Anonymous Society of Artists-Painters* to which he belonged. Since the style of Monet and other Impressionists represented such a dramatic leap unseen for centuries, the initial shock produced by the first Impressionist exhibitions was comparable to nothing ever experienced before in the whole history of artistic innovation. People initially considered the rapid execution and the shapelessness of the pictures as an insolent provocation; they thought that they were being made fun of and the revenge they took was as cruel as they were able to contrive.² Soon afterwards, in derision, a journalist called Louis Leroy who belonged to a Journal called *Le Charivari* coined the word *Impressionnistes* or *Impressionists* (a name inspired by Monet's *Impression – Sunrise*) as a general title for those exhibitors, implying that they only sought to depict their personal impression on a scene rather than the subjects themselves. Those artists, however, somehow adopted that term for their third group exhibition in 1877, even though some disliked the label. This was the origin of the term *Impressionism*.³ Let's take a closer look at it.

5.2.2 Evolutionism, Transience, and Impressionism

The whole method of the Impressionists was bent on stressing that the world we live in is not a constant state of being but a dynamic process. Like most other forward-looking individuals in

² Remember how nowadays parents despise the latest productions of the entertainment industry as mentioned in chapter two?

³ Strictly speaking, this work of Monet was not in itself a work that needed to be regarded as the criterion of Impressionism. There were many works before and after that represented the aims and achievements of the movement more fully. Yet it had a particular lustre and interest in providing the movement with its name.

those days, they believed that the world we see is only an infinitely short link in the never-ending process of evolution. Thus, they considered everything they saw to be charged of energy and ready to advance to its next stage of development at any moment.

It is precisely this dynamic worldview that the Impressionists wanted to portray on their canvases. For this reason, they sought not to depict some sophisticated permanent qualities of a scene. Instead, convinced that light is the principal factor in determining the immediate appearance of objects, they exclusively stressed on the momentary effect of lighting on the colour of their subjects. Given that the lighting on an object is always changing, the subjects as depicted on their canvases therefore represented only a moment of the scene.⁴ In short, they illustrated the momentary and transitory nature of the world by capturing the first fleeting optical impression of a scene.

Furthermore, in order to illustrate the idea that everything in the world is charged of energy, they employed various expedients and tricks unique to Impressionism. The representation of light, air and atmosphere, the dissolution of the evenly coloured surface into spots and dabs of colour, the decomposition of the local colour into values of perspective and aspect, the play of reflected light and illuminated shadows, the quivering, trembling dots and the hasty, loose and abrupt strokes of the brush, the whole improvised technique with its rapid and rough sketching, the fleeting, seemingly careless perception of the object, the brilliant casualness of the execution, plus numerous other techniques were all employed to express that feeling of a stirring, dynamic, and constantly changing reality.

⁴ Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), who discovered the law of complementary colours and the coloration of shadows, and John Constable (1776-1837), who established the complex composition of colour effects in nature, already anticipated much of the Impressionistic method. The energizing of vision, which is the essence of Impressionism, at any rate begins with them.

In short, every Impressionistic painting is in fact a deposit of moments of the ever-evolving world around us as well as the representation of a precarious, unstable balance in the play of contending forces. The Impressionistic vision transformed nature into a process of growth and decay in which everything stable and coherent is dissolved into metamorphoses and assumes the character of the unfinished and fragmentary. The reproduction of the subjective perception of the dynamic world instead of the objective substratum of a humanized or deified nature, with which the history of Modern perspective painting began, here achieved its culmination.

Interestingly enough, this dynamic worldview is deeply rooted in both Romanticism and the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin (1809-1882). The Romanticists in general believed that human life and institutions are essentially progressive realization of ideals, and they turned men to a preoccupation with the past as the revelation and the condition of those ideals. That was the beginning of the great age of historical investigation. Gradually, it bred the Romantic conception of growth and expansion and development as the fundamental thing in human experience, and therefore in the universe at large.

The Romantic confidence in human progress was later further strengthened in a godsend-fashion by Darwin's epoch-making theory of evolution. Originally, Darwin's works exclusively dealt with biology, as they discussed the principle of natural selection in nature as well as the accompanied evolution of species. However, much to his surprise, his theory of evolutionism soon exerted an unparalleled influence upon other areas, including the shaping of the Modern society and Modern mind.

One of the most important ex-biology influences that evolutionism enjoyed was its contribution on the restructuring of the scientific method. Science in the mid-nineteenth century was rapidly changing its character. Profoundly influenced by the critiques of the Romanticists, science gradually abandoned the world-machine

method invented by Descartes and finalized by Newton, in which mathematics has been exclusively used to explain the mechanics of a never-changing nature in harmony; and in the meantime, a new methodology known as the mechanistic method that is based on the new evolutionary biology in place of Newtonian physics emerged.

Evolutionary thought has brought a new emphasis on the complexity of the nature. As Darwin and other scientists soon realized, the mechanics of nature as a whole was in fact much more complex than simple mathematics could explain. For this reason, new scientists began to approach things differently. They no longer attempted to seek a simple mathematical relationship underneath a complex phenomenon. Instead, they broke nature into simpler elements and processes whose behaviour could be mathematically formulated and predicted. And once these simpler elements and processes have been understood, men have gone on to investigate how they acted when combined in a complex system.

The best way to understand this new methodology known as the mechanistic method was by looking at its application in biology. No longer did the biologists aimed to discover the "law of gravity" in biology that would explain every little details inside an organism in purely mathematical terms; rather, they concentrated their energy on the investigation of individual elements or processes inside an organic body, like the composition of blood, the mechanism of lung, or the role of our nervous system, where each of these processes was to be repeatedly verified through experiments. The nature of science changed from a mathematically deductive system that would explain the reasons for things, to a mathematically formulated but experimentally derived description of events.

Moreover, evolutionism, by interpreting the nature as a never-ending process of growth instead of a static state of harmony, made men to examine just what the process is and just what it does in its part, instead of seeking the end purpose of the world-process as a whole. People were satisfied with all the little truths which

experimentation can reveal, and rejected the ultimate goal of Aquinas of metaphysical contemplation of a fixed and static structure of truth. Men all agree with G. E. Lessing: “If God held concealed in His right hand all truth, and in His left only the ever eager impulse after truth, and said to me: ‘Choose!’ I should reverently take His left hand and say: ‘Father, give unto me! The absolute truth is for Thee alone.’”⁵

It was mostly from this mechanistic method and the dynamic interpretation of nature that the Modern mind was formulated. Where the Enlightenment ideal was the rational, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards the desirable was to be at the end of the process of development, and the new terms of praise were “Modern”, “up-to-date”, “advanced”, and “progressive”. From then on, to exist meant to be always growing, always rejecting some of the old and combining it in new forms.

The belief that it is glorious to be up-to-date or advanced penetrated into the newly emerged Industrial Society as well, thereby further contributing to the dynamic view of life. To be precise, the Industrial Revolution in fact began in England back in the mid of the eighteenth century, thanks to England’s relative political stability, well-developed business law code, plus many other factors. Soon, both production and productivity rocketed so that by 1830 England emerged as “the schoolmaster of industrial Europe.”⁶

Nonetheless, it must be borne in mind that until at least the mid of the nineteenth century, even the more advanced Western Europe was still predominantly agricultural (See Figure 5.2). As late as 1830, except in England and Belgium, national changes as

⁵ G.E. Lessing, “Duplik,” in *Werker*, ed. Lachmann-Muncker, XIII, 23-4; quoted in John Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, pp. 491.

⁶ R. M. Hartwell, “Economic Change in England and Europe,” in *War and Peace in an Age of Upheaval: 1793-1830*, ed. C. W. Crawley, vol. 9, *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 40.

affected by the Industrial Revolution was not dramatic, and in “the vast area of Europe men’s way of life and way of earning a living [remained] unchanged.”⁷

Figure 5.2 Percentage of Population Engaged in Non-Scientific Agriculture in 1830⁸

Country	Percentage
Italy	60%
France	60%
Prussia	70%
Spain	90%
Russia	95%
England	25%

However, starting from mid-nineteenth century, energies were shifting in the direction of industrial and urban development. London and Paris became proud centres of the new civilization, eager to extol the new virtues of Industrial Revolution and the market economy to the rest of the world. Germany, after its unification in 1871, later even became more industrialized than England and France, thanks to her excellent technical education, which increasingly focused on science and mathematics.⁹ By the end

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Statistics showed that the growth of universities graduates in science and mathematics from 1841 to 1881 far surpassed the growth in philosophy and history.

Year	Philosophy and History	Science and Mathematics
1841	839	132
1881	4546	2682
Increase of	441.8%	1931.8%

of the century, Germany became the most important producer in electrical and chemical industry, in manufactured food, and even in weaponry.¹⁰ A contemporary wrote that Germany was “the first country to bring a scientific and methodical spirit on the organization of technical education. She is today far ahead of any country in Europe in practical progress in industrial development”¹¹

In such industrial world where everyone chased after profit and strived for progresses, industrialists were compelled to intensify the demand for improved products by artificial means and must not allow the feeling that the new is always better to cool down, if they really want to profit from the achievements of technology. This continual and increasingly rapid replacement of old articles in everyday use by new ones often brought about a senseless and fruitless mania for innovation as well as a restless striving for the new for the mere sake of novelty. Thus, the Industrial Society introduces an unprecedented dynamism in the whole attitude to life and it was above all this new feeling of speed and change that found expression in Impressionism.

Another way which the Industrial Revolution helped to formulate the dynamic attitude of life was the development of cultural centres into large industrial and commercial cities in the Modern sense; these formed the soil in which the new art was rooted. Impressionism was above all an urban art because it saw the world through the eyes of the townsman and reacted to external impressions with the overstrained nerves of a Modern technical man. Moreover, it described the changeability, the nervous rhythm, the

sudden, sharp but always ephemeral impression of city life. And precisely as such, it implied an enormous expansion of sensual perception, a new sharpening of sensibility and a new irritability.

The rapid change in the Industrial Society that town dwellers witnessed everyday was of course part of the reason of their dynamic worldview, but that was also partly due to extreme contrast caused by the solitary town life. At first sight, it may seem surprising that the metropolis, with its herding together and intermingling of people, should produce this intimate art rooted in the feeling of individual singularity and solitude. But it was a familiar fact that nothing seemed more isolating as the close proximity of too many people, and nowhere would one feel more lonely and forsaken as in a great crowd of strangers. These two basic feelings which life in such an environment produced, the feeling of being alone and unobserved, on the one hand, and the impression of roaring traffic, incessant movement and constant variety, on the other hand, bred the Impressionistic outlook on life in which the most subtle moods were combined with the most rapid alternation of sensations.

In summary, the theory of evolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the new urban life had together given rise to a so-called Modern spirit, which considered everything in the world as momentary, which deemed progresses as the only goal of life, and which felt the nervousity and loneliness of urban life. These complex feelings of Modern minds were yet cunningly captured by the Impressionists through their innovative techniques.

5.2.3 Human Experience and Scientific Vision

Capturing the first fleeting visual impression of a scene was merely one of the many features of Impressionism. Equally important was the scientific vision that they utilized to capture that scene of transience. In fact, the whole philosophy underneath

From Johannes Conrad, *The German Universities for the Last Fifty Years*, trans. John Hutchison (Glasgow: D. Bryce & Son, 1885), pp. 162-3.

¹⁰ For a list of German industrial achievements, Earl Dean Howard, *The Cause and Extent of the Recent Industrial Progress of Germany* (Boston: Houghton, 1907), pp. 58-62.

¹¹ Fabian A. G. Ware, *Educational Foundations of Trade and Industry* (New York: D. Appleton and co., 1901), pp. 101.

Impressionism could be neatly summed up in the following quote of Monet:

When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you.¹²

In other words, they understood from the reality only masses of colour and shape, with no attention being paid on the higher purpose or spiritual force behind them.

This was the second area where Impressionism differed from all earlier arts. Until the dawn of Impressionism, art reproduced objects by *signs*, where Impressionism represented them through their components, through *parts* of the material of which they were made up; and instead of a picture of the whole, the Impressionists merely provided us with the bricks of which an optical scene was composed. In other words, Impressionism constructed its particular subject from the bare data of the senses; it went back to our unconscious psychic mechanism and gave us to some extent the raw material of experience, which was further removed from our primordial conception of reality. As such, the representation of Impressionism was closer to pure sensual experience than to our human experience.

This exclusive emphasis on the optical aspects of a scene had important implications. By restricting elements of representation to the purely visual and by eliminating everything of non-optical nature or that could not be translated into optical terms, the vision of

¹² This is an often-quoted motto of modern painters that Monet said to Lilla Cabot Perry, which she later inserted in her article entitled “Reminiscences of Claude Monet from 1889 to 1909,” *The American Magazine of Art*, March 1927, pp. 120.

the Impressionists in a sense became something like a camera. No longer did the painters use their human experience to interpret the world they saw, and no longer was our imagination and illusion of any importance – these were in fact exactly the attitude to avoid. What alone counted was the painter’s skill to analyze the visual effect of light on the subjects. Lilla Cabot Perry (1848-1933) the American Impressionist painter once recalled Monet having told her many years ago that “he wished he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint in this way without first knowing what the objects were that he saw before him....”¹³ Perry later summed up in her article: “Monet’s philosophy of painting was to paint what you really see, not what you think you ought to see.”¹⁴ What Monet was telling Perry was in fact the ideal of Impressionism, namely to exclude all humanist values and imaginary elements from the canvas that risked to “pollute” the underlying uncontaminated optical scene.

As such, they reduced the world to a mere composition of shape and colours, and this new methodology waived all the so-called literary elements of the subject, the story or the anecdote from their works. As one of the earliest historians and theorists of this movement cleverly pointed out, “it is the treatment of a subject for the sake of the tones, and not for the sake of the subject itself, that distinguishes the Impressionists from other painters.”¹⁵ This neutralization and reduction of the motif to its bare material essentials was no doubt an expression of the anti-romantic outlook of the time and could be seen as the trivialization and stripping bare of all the imaginary and humanist qualities of the subject-matter of art. It abruptly marked the end of the old artistic tradition that believed that “artistic imagination truly mirrors nature, [...] represents the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Arnold Hauser, *Naturalism, Impressionism, the Film Age*, pp. 161-2.

world and gives a valid picture of human experience.”¹⁶ The smile that the Greeks discovered in plastic arts was lost in Modern art, sacrificing to the purely pictorial aspect. For the first time in art since Renaissance, a painting found its basis entirely on a scientific vision and excluded human experience from the realm of art.

This new attitude also explained their radical choice of subject matter. They stayed away altogether from the traditional themes that past generations of artists repeatedly used, namely historical moments, religious stories and romantic emotions. Instead, trivial scenes from everyday urban life or random landscapes became their preference. Such deliberate avoidance of the traditional intensive scenes was no doubt another means to strip all humanistic values from their canvases.

This Impressionist method of solely taking into accounts the visual elements of a scene was fundamentally scientific in nature. Both the Impressionists and the scientists believed that the natural world would be best understood through a rational assessment of measurables, and increasingly excluded our faith that personal experience, imagination, and metaphysics were meaningful. From that moment onwards, we ceased to use our experience to interpret the world around us.

It was mostly the revived faith in the scientific method that had given rise to this Impressionistic vision of the world. To recall, the nineteenth century began with all human interests and values deeply bounded up with an anthropocentric worldview that gave everything in the world a humanist significance. However, steadily the advance of science was undermining that view, and making the older theological sanctions for man’s ideals seemed untenable. By the 1860s, progresses in Modern science were so impressive they could no longer be disdained. Particularly, the idea of evolution, its

most novel and revolutionary concept, has come to stand as the new symbol of scientific faith. The strikingly spectacular development of natural science since 1850s soon created an unprecedented confidence in science. At the long last, scientific vision became the mainstream method to look at the world.

An interesting phenomenon to note here is that almost all the important scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century appeared in the second half of the century, once the Romantic passion began to cool down. For example, the theory of optics by Jean Bernard Léon Foucault (1819-1868) in 1850; the theory of electricity and magnetism by James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) in 1855; the electro-magnetic theory by Sir Joseph John Thomson (1856-1940) and Hendrik Lorentz (1853-1928) in 1890; the discovery of X-Ray by Wilhelm Konrad Röntgen (1845-1923) in 1895; the discovery of Radium and Polonium by Marie Curie (1867-1934) in 1898; the periodic table of chemical elements by Demitri Mendeleev (1834-1907) in 1871; the theory of evolution by Darwin in 1859; various elementary psychological theories by Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) in 1870s; the psycho-analysis by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) towards the end of the century; plus myriad other major breakthroughs in practically all divisions of science. These discoveries were all attempts to interpret the world in rational and measurable terms.

5.2.4 Passivity and Aestheticism

Apart from the dynamism and the scientific vision, another feature that distinguished Impressionism from all previous styles was its so-called “subjective” nature. As shown in *Impression – Sun Rise*, Monet represented a figure through thick brushstrokes without actually drawing the figure. Thus, instead of definitive and concrete images, there were only masses of colour and shape on the canvas, which would always make up a different picture in spectators’ mind when viewed from different angles and under different lighting

¹⁶ A. K. Thorlby, “Literature,” in *Material Progress and World-Wide Problems: 1870-1898*, vol. 11, *The New Cambridge Modern History*, pp. 121.

condition. As such, Monet cunningly allowed for many paintings to lie inside just one painting. By leaving to the viewers to fill in the missing details on the canvas according to particular circumstances at the moment, Monet and other Impressionists paved the way for other abstract and subjective paintings later in the twentieth century, which all demanded subjective evaluation from the viewer side.

Such heavy dependence on transient external factors like angle and light when appreciating Impressionist paintings expressed a philosophy of passivity and of unresisting absorption in the passing moment. All of a sudden, our human experience lost its role in the interpretation of the world, yielding it to various dynamic and transient factors. Correspondingly, an art in accordance with such vision of the world would seek the criterion of truth in the *hic et nunc*¹⁷ of the individual as affected by the surroundings; it would consider chance the principle of everything, and the truth of the moment as invalidating all other truths; and it implied the prevalence of a relation to things the property of which was to be non-committal as well as changeable. To sum up, the primacy of the moment, of change and chance implied the dominion of the passing mood over permanent qualities of life, and the complete surrender to the immediate environment.

Not only was this reduction of the artistic representation to the mood and circumstances of the moment the expression of a fundamentally passive outlook of life, it was at the same time an acquiescence in the role of the spectator, of the receptive and contemplative subject; it represented a standpoint of aloofness, a feeling that nothing in life would reach an end and a goal, as well as a stress on the episodic nature and irrelevance of all external happenings – in short, the aesthetic attitude purely and simply.

This was the beginning of the age of aestheticism. Gradually, the work of art ceased to be a means to develop and express human

nature and human feelings, but became merely an end in itself, a self-sufficient game, and the most beautiful gift which life has to offer, whose charm is apt to be destroyed by any extraneous and extra-aesthetic purpose. In short, an Impressionist painting was a piece of art for mere aesthetic purpose. Such aesthetic culture implied the endeavour to turn one's life into a work of art; in other words, into something costly, useless, and superfluous, something flowing along freely and extravagantly, something offered up to the beauty, the pure form, the harmony of tones, colours, and lines. It not only renounced life for the sake of art, not only sought for the justification of life in art itself, not only regarded the world of art as the only real compensation and consolation for the disappointments of life, but it went so far as to claim that life would be more beautiful and more conciliatory when clothed in art, when we were no longer the actors but the spectators of our life, and when we created or enjoyed works of art.

Even literature could not be immune from this "Modernization". Towards the end of the century, all kinds of unheard-of literary styles under the banner of "avant-garde" and "Modernism" sprang up one after another, each bearing unmistakable symptoms of divergence from the Romantic style. From then onwards, people spent their time puzzling over lyrics which would express only momentary moods, fleeting sentiment, atmospherical impressions, scarcely palpable sensations, and indefinable sensual stimuli. This unsubstantial, undecided and vague literary style which merely expressed fleeting moods and transient atmosphere quickly dominated European literature. Stories were reduced to an indispensable minimum, plots to purely lyrical scenes, and characters drawing to the description of spiritual disposition and trends. Everything became indefinite, episodic, and peripheral to a life without a spiritual centre.

Among all the literary innovations of the avant-garde artists, the so-called *pure poésie* or *pure poetry* was perhaps the most representative one. To understand the very concept of pure poetry, it

¹⁷ *Hic et nunc*: Latin, literally *Here and Now*; meaning the passing mood of an individual in a particular moment.

sufficed to bring up a famous quote from the great French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898): “a beautiful line without meaning is more valuable than a less beautiful with meaning.”¹⁸ In other words, the most elegant poem should be one that is without a subject, which would be pure form and pure style, hence mere ornament; while the poets should renounce the rousing of emotions and passions and the use of extra-aesthetic, practical and rational motifs. With his original views on the nature of art he had in mind as a poet, it should not yield any surprise that he usually began writing a poem without knowing exactly where the first line would lead and that his poem arose as the crystallization of words and lines in perfect harmony on a literal and rhythmical level. This doctrine of pure poetry laid down the principle that for a poetic experience to take place, it would not be necessary or it would, at any rate, not be sufficient to grasp its rational meaning; instead, it sufficed to contemplate on the harmony produced with words and lines.¹⁹ After all, it was not at all necessary that a pure poem itself should have an exact meaning.

The similarity of the thoroughly aesthetic mode of reception in the case of pure poetry described above to the contemplation of an Impressionist painting should be evident, but pure poetry contained features that were not necessarily apparent in Impressionist paintings. Pure poetry represented the purest and most uncompromising form of aestheticism, expressed the basic idea that a poetic world wholly independent of ordinary, practical, and rational reality, and demonstrated the plausibility of an autonomous, self-contained aesthetic microcosm revolving around its own axis. This was an unmistakable symptom of decadence in terms of the literary tradition that dated back to the zenith of Renaissance: no longer is our artistic imagination a means to reproduce the world and to give a valid picture of our human experience, but merely a means to produce superficial beauty. This was thoroughly a passive, if not reclusive, outlook of life.

¹⁸ Arnold Hauser, *Naturalism, Impressionism, the Film Age*, pp. 186.

¹⁹ Remember the lyrics of Twins' song in chapter two?

The passivity and aestheticism in art were no doubt direct consequences of the new Modern attitude of life. Most noticeably, as mentioned in a previous section, the sharp contrast between the nervous rhythm of the industrial cities and the solitude felt by town dwellers generated the conception of man as an organism reacting to and acting upon a complex environment beyond the control of any human. This situation was substantially different from the spiritual world for people in Renaissance, Reformation era and Romantic Age where humanist imagination and human feelings would suffice to comprehend the spiritual natural world and bring forth a spiritual peace of mind. Moreover, the widespread utilitarian attitude of life, namely the conviction that the economic utility and carnal sensation was the only standard of existence, was especially destructive to the traditional virtues of a moral and virtuous life. After all, in a utilitarian society, to exist merely meant to be always developing, always rejecting some of the old and adopting the more useful new methods, and to enjoy fruits of our labour.

Another factor that would explain the collapse of traditional humanistic values of a spiritual life like those that belonged to Renaissance, Reformation era, and the Romantic Age was that the new scientific truth abruptly marked the end of religion's claims of our spirit. The second half of the nineteenth century was perhaps best known for all those exciting scientific discoveries. However, at the same time that the confidence in science grew, faith in God faded. With the new scientific truth at hand, some radical theologians like David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) began to raise serious doubts on Christianity. Strauss, for instance, denied in his celebrated work entitled *Leben Jesu* or *Life of Jesus* the very existence of any supernatural events in the career of Jesus and claimed that the whole Bible was merely an imaginative and mythological embodiment of spiritual truths about human experience. Similarly, Feuerbach maintained that the very conception of God was merely a changing ideal that men set up for themselves in response to the needs of the religious experience.

Their attacks were understandable. With the steady advancement in biology and anatomy, people began to question the virgin-conception of Mary and the resurrection of Jesus. With the stressing on mathematical clarity, people could hardly comprehend the concept of Trinity that three distinctly different divine beings, namely the God Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are in essence one single entity. With the theory of evolution, people became suspicious of the spontaneous creation of all living creatures by God. With Modern geological theories, people no longer believed that the Earth was created in 4004 BC. And with the progresses in physics and chemistry, people raised doubts on the miracle stories in Bible and hagiographies.

The most decisive blow on Christianity from Modern science, however, came from Darwin. The traditional image of the beneficent and omnipotent God Father since the Twelve Century Renaissance requires no elaboration here. However, Darwin squarely destroyed this loving image of God, as there seemed to him too much misery in the world, impeding a rational mind from believing in such a God. In a letter in 1860, he wrote that: "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars."²⁰ *Ichneumonidae* is a type of wasp that lays her eggs in a caterpillar. However, before doing so, she would carefully guide her sting into each ganglion of the prey's central nervous system so as to paralyze the animal but not killing it. This way, the meat will stay fresh for the growing larva. It is not known whether the paralysis acts as a general anaesthetic or it is like curare in just freezing the victim's ability to move. If the latter, the prey might be aware of being eaten alive from inside but unable to move a muscle to do anything about it.

²⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 284.

This sounds savagely cruel, but as science reveals to us, nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent. This lesson is one of the hardest for humans to learn. We cannot accept that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous: indifferent to all suffering, and lacking all purpose. Simultaneous with the collapse of the traditional purpose of life based on Christian doctrine, a new meaning of life based on the idea of evolution emerged. People began to accept the idea that "life has no higher purpose than to perpetuate the survival of DNA."²¹ All of a sudden, human life was stripped of all higher purposes, thereby facilitating the entry of those non-spiritual purposes of life described earlier.

In summary, the making of Modern mind was itself a phenomenon with intricate roots and complex features. It represented a categorical rupture with the Romantic ideology in terms of attitude of life and interpretation of the world. A Modern mind preferred rational assessment using mathematics over natural feeling using human experience, mechanistic interpretation of nature over spiritual reading, and acquisition of political power and economic fruits over cultivation of human nature. Once again, after a temporary recovery in the Romantic Age, the humanistic tradition was again on the wane, yielding its former position to the scientific culture.

5.3 Information Age, Post-Modernism and Beyond²²

Since the beginning of chapter three of this book, attention has been wholly focused on the unfolding of Western history. At first glance, such a hasty survey that covers almost three thousand years

²¹ Richard Dawkins, "God's Utility Function," *Scientific American* 273 (November 1995): pp. 80.

²² Part of the materials from this part is taken from Margaret B. Hull, "Postmodern Philosophy Meets Pop Cartoon: Michel Foucault and Matt Groening," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34 (Fall 2000): pp. 57-67; Arthur A. Berger, *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society* (California: AltaMira Press, 1998).

of history may appear completely irrelevant to our analysis on contemporary Hong Kong popular culture in chapter two. However, the truth is that this rapid survey provides us with the indispensable background knowledge required to breed a thorough understanding on the contemporary society.

5.3.1 Western Civilization and Humanism

Currently, the generally accepted interpretation of Western history since the days of Greece is to divide it into three epochs – Antiquity, “Middle Ages”, and Modern Age. (Let’s leave aside fancy terms like Information Age or Post-Modern Age for the moment.) Such tripartite method was based on a couple of criteria like economic structure, this-worldliness, and technology. Under these principles, the Ancient world is characterized by its slavery production mode, its pseudo-market economy, and its secular mentality; the “Middle Ages” is known for its “feudal” system and its other-worldliness; and the Modern Age is usually recognized by its “capitalistic” economic structure, the use of machine, and its worldliness. This method of classifying history into these three logical units is so convenient and popular that few people attempt to question its accuracy.

The brief survey on Western history in this work, however, seems to have created a new vision of Western history. This new method possesses certain important features. First and foremost, it pushes technology, economic structure, social structure, and level of worldliness to the back of the scene, and instead uses the most fundamental and genuine constituent of humanity as the only relevant property of history – our human nature. After all, when studying the long history of mankind, how can anyone possibly neglect what is most elemental to us and instead resort to all kinds of extraneous factors?

It is easy to claim that one should use human nature as the only guideline of history; it is another matter when it comes to decide on the means to realize this concept. Human nature is not something that is easy, if not impossible, to reduce to mathematical or concrete terms and then to analyze with clear-cut logic – exactly the method nowadays historians employ. This is where art and religion come into the play. As have been repeatedly illustrated since the beginning of chapter three, art and religion are our most reliable indicators on the status of human nature, as they neatly reveal that our human nature can roughly assume two conditions: humanist and non-humanist. Generally speaking, a humanist mind uses genuine human experience to look at the world, interprets the world from a standpoint of human nature, and lightly values things that help little to understand and develop our human nature; while a non-humanist mind either relies on pure rationality or obeys an indisputable source of higher truth when looking at the world, interprets the surrounding in mystical or mathematical terms, and highly values things that help little to understand our human nature. Such categorical bipartite division of human nature is the basics of the following interpretation of Western history.

Western civilization officially began with Classical Greece at around 800BC, even though earlier dates like the founding of Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations might be equally plausible alternatives. Classical Greece is the first humanist epoch in Western history, thanks to its unique Polis system as well as its humanized polytheism. As shown from all kinds of literature, sculpture, and music produced during this period, these Classical Greeks were no doubt enormously interested in the study and shaping of their human nature. It was the era when our human nature received the highest regard.

The later collapse of the Polis system somewhere near 400BC due to their commercial success and other external factors, however, abruptly put an end to the humanistic culture of the Classical age. From then on, the Western world gradually swung to

the other end of the pendulum. On one hand, all the former stately and heroic qualities atrophied into individualism, as shown in new sculptures, comedies, mystical philosophies, and mystery cults; on the other hand, the top intellects turned their interests from human nature into the natural world, thereby inaugurating the first great scientific movement in the West.

For a short moment, the Romans who conquered the entire Greek world strived to imitate Classical Greek culture from every front, and successfully produced a list of immortals like Cicero and Virgil. However, the most outstanding achievements of the Romans lied in its development in jurisprudence and the two hundred years of prosperity. Unfortunately, their lust of wealth, together with the prevalence of mysticism and the increasingly rigid social structure, destined to make any attempt to build a humanist culture fruitless. The lack of any noteworthy cultural achievement during the so-called *Pax Romana* said it all.

The *Pax Romana* ended at around 180AD, to be followed by a series of civil wars and barbarian invasions. As the Empire appeared about to collapse, Christianity, the most popular mystery cult amongst all others, gradually absorbed the lower half of the Roman society. The spread of Christianity could not be reversed even with the restoration of order and the massive persecutions under Emperor Diocletian in the early fourth century; so that by 476 when the Western Roman Empire collapsed, a new culture mostly based on early Christian doctrines was already in place, ready to turn the earth to the service of God.

The subsequent so-called “Dark Age” of Europe was the heyday of non-humanist culture, as understanding and development of our human nature had nothing to do with the early Christian doctrines. This was the era of miracles, Saints, and longing for a better after-life, which demanded only blind faith, instead of shaping of our human nature. The disappearance of artistic imagination from the entire continent as well as the lack of concern on humanity in the

only remaining literary genre known as hagiography showed all too clearly the non-humanist nature of the Dark Age.

Beginning from the eleventh century, however, the long-disappeared tradition of humanism, for some largely unidentified reasons, abruptly revived. The chivalric literature, the humanized Mary and Christ, the emergence of apostolic life, as well as the spurring of scholarship all unmistakably point to a renewed interest in our human nature. This tradition continued through the Italian Renaissance era, as shown in the renewed interest in Classical culture as well as the magnificent artistic achievements of the period. Especially during the Reformation Era, our human experience and human feelings gained unparalleled importance.

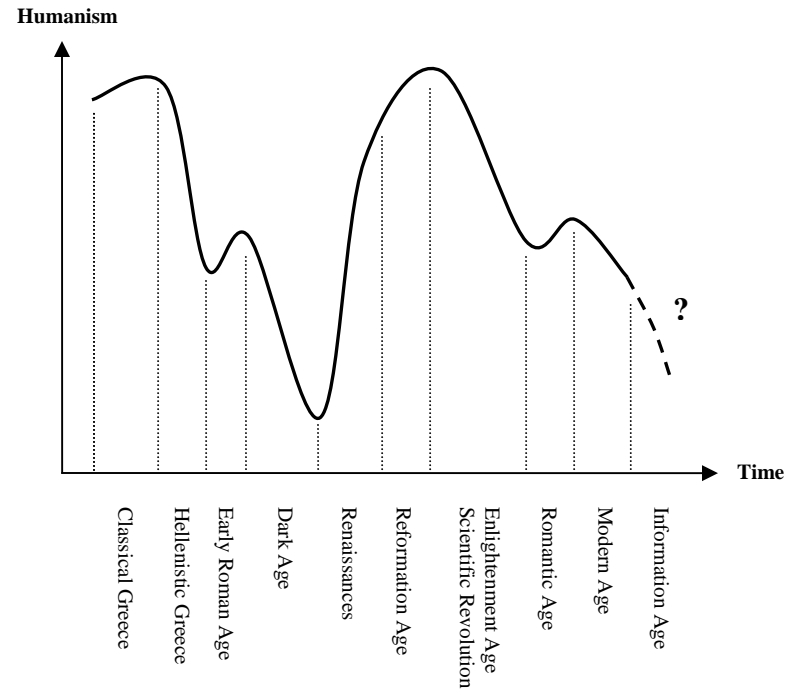
Somewhere in the seventeenth century, meanwhile, the scientific revolution finalized by Newton successfully banished the human factor from our interpretation of the universe, and upheld the banner that mathematics and logic are the only keys to the ultimate truth. This movement was later violently criticized by the Romanticists in late eighteenth century who claimed that our human experience, not a mathematical methodology, was the only reliable source of knowledge. The sharp contrast in terms of humanism between these two movements could best be shown through the differences between their artistic style and the religious trend.

Unfortunately, the Romanticists soon failed to hold the second scientific revolution in mid-nineteenth century. Accompanied with the Industrial Revolution and the new urban life in megacities, this general scientific movement voided much of the effort of the Romanticists to preserve the humanist culture. The newborn Modern culture could best be shown with Impressionism, the first variation of Modern art, characterized by its scientific vision, dynamism, and solitude. Such is the interpretation of Western history, using our human nature as the basic guideline.

5.3.2 A New Vision of Western History

Attentive readers must have already noticed how Western history, when analyzed using the humanist factor, seems to follow some kind of cyclical pattern. Indeed, beginning with the peak of humanist culture in Classical Greece, the Western civilization began to transform itself, though not in a linear fashion, into the non-humanist Dark Age culture. Then with the coming of the Twelfth Century Renaissance, humanism regained its long lost position in the West, and peaked somewhere in the early seventeenth century. The scientific revolution dealt a decisive blow at this humanist culture, only to be temporarily interrupted by the Romantic Movement. Nonetheless, science regained its stolen position in the mid-nineteenth century and continued to de-humanize the Western culture. However absurd it may appear, it is possible to represent this cyclical nature of Western history in the following graph (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3 Cyclical Nature of Western History



Thus, contrary to the general belief of most people, especially the Marxists, since the day of Classical Greece, the world has been moving in a cyclical pattern, in lieu of a constantly evolving fashion. Generally speaking, the Marxists believe that the world has always been marching towards a state of perfection, namely a communist society ruled by the so-called proletariats; where all the different phases of history, that is to say, the primitive age, the slavery age, the feudal age, and the capitalist age are merely some indispensable stages for the final communist phase. Leaving aside the final phase, such idealist conception of an ever-evolving history is perhaps the common belief of most Modern people. Indeed, when one looks at the standard of living in Antiquity thousands of years

ago, and then compares it to our Modern society (or information society, whatever it means), it is tempting to invoke the feeling that our civilization has always been constantly developing in every direction. Such feeling, of course, requires a complete ignorance or neglect of the thousand years long “Middle Ages”, which few people nowadays know in details anyway.

The substitution of the established evolutionary view of history with a cyclical view is certainly not the only area where the theory proposed in this book challenge the tradition. The methodology proposed in this book also decidedly diverges from the traditional historical method as well. By and large, when it comes to analyze history at any macro level, say a scope of a thousand years, nothing can be more important in the eyes of historians than the economic structure, the diplomatic events, the political edifice, as well as the intellectual achievements of various periods of time. In any case, those are the things that Modern people are interested in the most. Yet, this book abandons this conventional approach and instead focuses mostly on the artistic and religious aspects of history. To be clear, it is not that art and religion in themselves which are of insurmountable significance, but it is because art and religion provide such a categorical indication on the status of humanism that nothing else can rival. For this reason, much of the materials used in the analysis deals with arts and religion.

The complete abandonment of the term “Middle Ages” – the period in Western history from somewhere in the seventh century until somewhere in the seventeenth century – represents yet another subversion of the established. The myth-like “Middle Ages” is usually thought as an age of passivity, of superstition, and of stagnation, thus an age of utter “darkness”. Yet, once we abandon these conventional opinions and analyze those thousand years using humanism as the basic guideline, it immediately becomes clear that it will only create confusion by uniformly labelling those thousand years under the term “Middle Ages”. As has been thoroughly illustrated in chapter three and four, “Middle Ages” should be

divided into two using year 1000AD as the watershed, as these two phases of the “Middle Ages” diverge fundamentally in almost every aspect, especially in their valuation of human nature. Only by abandoning this very term can one clear all the fogs that have long puzzled that epoch.

Moreover, it is only with the new methodology that one comes to grasp the real significance of Modernity. Traditionally, people associate a positive feeling with the word “Modern”, as it signifies everything from advanced, efficient, fair, and rational, to intellectual, progressive, and dynamic. After all, as mentioned above, it is indeed difficult to resist these impressions when one compares the appearance of the Modern world to that of the “Middle Ages” or Antiquity – not to mention the age of hunting and gathering tens of thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, with these one-sided opinions on Modernity in mind, one necessarily overlooks the difference in terms of humanism between the Modern Age and the preceding humanist epochs like the Renaissance and Romantic Age. What really distinguishes the Modern Age from other eras is our disdain on human nature and human experience.

Last but not least, the unusual broad perspective of this book that covers the economic, political, diplomatic, intellectual, religious, and spiritual aspects of almost three thousand years of history might easily give rise to an impression of superfluity and pedantry. Nonetheless, it is only with such wide horizon that the secret historical trends will reveal themselves. This point can best be shown through an analogy with a story called *Flatland* by Edwin Abbott (1838-1926). As Abbott describes, Flatland is a two-dimensional world, meaning that everything is flat and two-dimensional, including the vision of the citizens. One night, a guest from the three-dimensional world arrives and gives a Flatland citizen a three-dimensional vision of the world, and this chosen citizen has then acquired a never-clearer vision of his own world of Flatland.

This is what this book is all about. When analyzing a certain phenomenon with narrow eyesight, one would then become a Flatland citizen in our world which has at least three dimensions. Only by broadening our horizon to a three-dimensional, four-dimensional, or even five-dimensional level may one really get to know the ultimate truth of our world, which nobody knows how many dimensions it has. For this reason, when analyzing the Day of Insignificance of December 1st 2001 where the autograph function of Twins in Hong Kong took place, I chose to take as wide a perspective as I can handle, in hope of getting the most multi-dimensional vision of this event. As such, the real significance of this autograph function will be unveiled.

The above mentioned new methodology with art as the main point of focus, the new interpretation on “Middle Ages” and Modern Age, as well as the cyclical view of history are, to be fair, rather abstract; therefore the true significance of the theory may not be apparent to non-historian general public. Nevertheless, there is another important discovery in this book that should be comprehensible even to average readers. This is the striking parallel between the Roman Age and the Modern Age.

As anyone accustomed with history would know, it is extremely dangerous to believe that history repeats. Yet, all the facts so far mentioned in this book clearly indicate that the final destiny of the Romans is a reliable preview for our own future. First and foremost, both the Roman Age and the Modern Age were originated from periods with high regards on human nature. Where the early Roman culture was deeply rooted by the Classical Greece, the Renaissances had similarly paved the way for Modern European culture. Parallels between Classical Greece and Renaissance Europe are nothing less than frightening. Both were under a religion that emphasize on human nature; both had produced a wide variety of artists who had shown enormous interest in humanity; both despised scientific study of nature; and, last and certainly the least, both the Classical Greek world and the Renaissance-era European world

coincidentally never came close to political unity under a militarist empire. In a word, both represented the models of a humanistic culture.

The parallels well continued after the close of these two humanistic eras. Both the Hellenistic Age and the Enlightenment Age were characterized by the feverish quest for scientific truth; both witnessed the collapse of traditional religion; both were gradually absorbed by a new kind of religion; both witnessed a change of style in artistic production. In short, both the Hellenistic Age and the Enlightenment Age symbolized a rapid decline of the humanist tradition.

Interestingly enough, both the Hellenistic Age and the Enlightenment were followed by a short revival of humanism. While the Republic phase of Roman Age had produced some great figures like Cicero and Virgil, the Romantic Age had produced Beethoven, Goethe, and many others. The temporarily defeated humanist tradition made a return.

Unfortunately, in the case of the Roman Empire, humanism was once again on decline once the *Pax Romana* arrived. As briefly mentioned in chapter three, from 27BC until 180AD, no major wars had been fought, and the Roman population, or at least the upper and middle class of the society, experienced two hundred years of unprecedented prosperity. This had had a couple of fateful consequences, most noticeably the lust of wealth, the spread of hedonist attitude of life, as well as the wide circulation of various mystical cults – all had devastating results on the traditional morality of the Romans. For this reason, Romans during this period of time left us no great artistic production, as compared to the Classical Greeks. Humanism was on defensive stance again, gradually yielding its place to mysticism.

The post-Romantic Age Europe apparently suffered a similar lot. Beginning from mid-nineteenth century, the general scientific

movement, the Industrial Revolution, the new urban life, and the now matured market economy hastily marked the end of the Romantic Age and the corresponding humanist tradition. What replaced it was a scientific vision of the world, an emphasis on efficiency and productivity, the general pursuit of wealth, and an aesthetic attitude of life – all of which are highly similar to the Roman Age. This Modern attitude of life was the origin of Impressionism and other avant-garde artistic movements in the second half of the century. Thus, similar to the case of the Romans, Modern people are once again losing the humanist vision of the world, succumbing to a scientific mentality.

5.3.3 The Long Twentieth century

This anti-humanist current as part of the process of Modernization had survived the two World Wars in the first half of twentieth century and in fact even showed signs of further strengthening afterwards, similar to how Christianity had survived the political chaos and Diocletian's persecutions. Such outcome was partly due to the two wars that had resulted in the decline of Europe in international politics. Until the eve of the First World War in 1914, Europe, then the centre of Western civilization, still controlled more than a third of territory in the world, and was in a leading position in world affairs.²³ However, the fierce challenges from United States and Japan as well as the two consecutive suicidal World Wars slowly put an end to European dominance of the world, so that after 1945, United States replaced Europe as the centre of Western civilization. Here, it is important to keep in mind that even though the Modernization movement was originated in Europe, pre-war European culture was still heavily under the influence of the Renaissance and Romantic Age. In other words, European society

²³ Among the eight so-called *Great Powers* in those days (Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy, United States, and Japan), six of them were European countries. No exaggeration that it was the era of the European.

was far from being modernized head-to-toe, or, to put it differently, stripped of all her humanist heritage. However, the United States which replaced Europe as the leader of the Western civilization after 1945 was less modest with traditional European culture as she strived to base herself on purely Modern ideas. From that moment onwards, the pace of Modernization accelerated. All this was a mere replay of the Roman Age when Rome replaced Athens as the centre of the Mediterranean civilization.

The main driving force of the post-war contemporary world was not much different from that of the pre-war Modern world. Generally speaking, our attention continued to shift from cultivating our human nature into furnishing ourselves with various fruits of science, and we deem everything in the world as dynamic complex organisms that can grant us the key to power once we subject it to our intelligence and mathematics – a genuine utilitarian attitude.

This attitude is most apparent in natural science. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, people have begun to consistently apply their scientific knowledge to “improve” the material world. For example, André Marie Ampère (1775-1836) the French physicist formulated a mathematical description of the magnetic field produced by a current-carrying conductor, which set the stage for telegraphy; Michael Faraday (1791-1867) the British physicist discovered electromagnetic induction which prepared the ground for the wide spread use of electricity in the coming centuries; the development in atomic physics associated with names like Max Karl Ernst Ludwig Planck (1858-1947), Albert Einstein (1879-1955), and Sir James Chadwick (1891-1974) resulted first in atomic weaponry, then in production of electricity; advancement in biochemistry has brought astonishing progress in medicine and pharmaceuticals; not to mention myriad other major breakthroughs in physics and chemistry in the last hundred years that have brought the world powerful inventions that we cannot live without. The famous quote

“knowledge is power”²⁴ neatly summarized the relationship between science and our contemporary life.

The so-called Information Society briefly discussed in chapter one is in fact another typical product of Modernity. On the whole, in an information economy, all the measurable aspects of business activities are transformed into mathematically manageable data. Past sales record, inventory management, delivery system, sales network, cost of different production mode, impacts on cash flow, information on competitors, various government policies, a choice of economic data, various risks associated with different modes of production, and of course all kinds of statistics on the target market are the most common type of data that companies accumulate. The next step is then to enter all these information in a computer, and then borrow its astonishing processing power to simulate various scenarios and eventually to come up with an optimal strategy that would produce the highest economic benefits.

An important element in the “informatized” business is the time factor. All information in itself is transient by nature, meaning that a piece of data may have substantially different values if arrived at different moments. Thus, it is essential for all the data to communicate to the corresponding recipients on the right moment. For this reason, the information technology industries kept updating various information processing tools to provide the business sector with faster computer, more reliable and convenient communication protocols, and more complicated and functional programs. As such, the relevant data can be turned into valuable information as rapid as possible.

²⁴ Many authorities attributed this aphorism to the British philosopher Francis Bacon (1562-1626). In "De Haeresibus" in his *Meditationes Sacrae* written in 1597, he wrote “nam et ipsa scientia potestas est”, literally meaning “for knowledge itself is power”. However, the Old Testament apparently says something similar in the Bible, Proverb 24:5: “A wise man is strong, and a man of knowledge increaseth strength.”

This is what the information revolution is all about. First, identify the relevant sorts of data; next, subject the data in mathematical terms; then, enter the data in computer; afterwards, command the computer to deduct the optimal strategy in the current situation; finally, execute the plan and enjoy the economic fruit of it. The parallel with the typical Modern outlook of the world, namely that the material world can be made better once guided by human intelligence, is complete.

Even military affairs could not resist the Modernization temper. Nowadays, before an advanced nation fight a war, the central command centre will first input all the relevant variables like a detailed landform, the capability and cost of all weaponry, estimation on the military strength of the adversaries, and many other variables, all in mathematically-manageable terms. Then, similar to the case with informatized business, supercomputers would be employed to simulate all the possible scenarios in the war, so as to come up with an optimal war plan that will produce the most desired outcome, given the current state of affairs. Even during the war, military officers would continue to update the war plan by taking into account all the dynamic variables like the movement of enemy units and weather forecast so that the military strategy will remain optimized. For this reason, it becomes crucial to acquire all the latest information from the battlefield, and hence all kinds of state-of-the-art communication tools like satellites are employed to ensure the accuracy of data at hands. From then on, a war, much like the fate of the natural world in the hands of the scientists, becomes something that can be subjected to our intelligence in mathematical terms.

The story is alike when the government runs the economy. In the eyes of the government officials, our economy is nothing more than a mathematically-manageable organism. The American government, for instance, accumulates all kinds of economic statistics from every corner of the world, ranging from detailed reports on the employment situation, level of consumer confidence, various retail sales figures, fluctuation in money supply, aggregate

price level, all sorts of interest rates, not to mention the same sets of data of other economies around the world. Then the relevant departments inside the government would again use supercomputers to analyze all these data and simulate the impacts of various sets of economic policies on the economy, in hope of devising the best action plan that shall ensure sustainable growth. That was the basic methodology of the American Board of Federal Reserve under Alan Greenspan (b. 1926) towards the end of twentieth century who, after a thorough study of the economy in mathematical terms, uses different monetary policy to guide the growth of American economy. No doubt these officials believe that the world is better off if it is under scientific guidance of human intelligence.

Perhaps the most controversial amongst all the application of the scientific method in conducting our society lies in our system of education.²⁵ Probably the one feeling that is shared by most, if not all, students in contemporary educational institutions in advanced nations is that the system is altogether repressive and prohibitive. Such opinion is understandable since there are always loads of rules and duties that completely fetter the free will of students.²⁶ And when they fail to meet the requirement, severe punishment shall follow. For this reason, many rebellious youths consider school as hell.

However, from the point of view of the bureaucrats in the department of education, the whole system is meant to be productive.

²⁵ Loosely speaking, the same scientific method is used in directing soldiers, factory workers, and prisoners, but here we shall only focus on the educational system of youths.

²⁶ Matt Groening (b. 1954), the pop cartoonist who created *The Simpsons*, has a child in his cartoon *School Is Hell* to ask: "Why is school run like a jail? How come you're so boring? Why are there so many stupid rules? How come these desks are so uncomfortable? How come there is so much emphasis placed on rote memorization? Why are we given so much pointless busy work? How come we need permission to speak?" See Margaret B. Hull, "Postmodern Philosophy Meets Pop Cartoon," pp. 57.

In order to illustrate this point, it is necessary to first briefly examine the system. The initial step that the school performs to run the system is to assign each student an individualized space like student number, student file, and student desk, with the explicit intention to facilitate assessment, authoritative control, and especially surveillance of the conduct of each individual subject. Such feeling of being spatialized and constantly surveilled ensures that students would behave in ways designated by the school, lest followed by immediate punishment.

Once the self-discipline born out of the perpetual threat of penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant is firmly rooted, the students will become obedient and will voluntarily subject themselves to habits, rules, orders and all sorts of other constraints of a conformity that must be achieved. From then on, an invisible authority is continually exercised around them and upon them, which they must allow to function automatically in them. Gradually, all deviation from the main guidelines will be excluded, leaving a set of homogenized conducts designated by the board. The end purpose in the classroom is, therefore, to normalize young bodies through years of following discreet directions, while sitting still in one place at a classroom desk.

It must be borne in mind, however, that contemporary educational institutions did not carry out these disciplinary programs that normalize the students for sinister reasons like crushing all individuality from the students. Instead, those intense moulding have the clear purpose of producing in every student certain socially useful behaviours and knowledge, like obedience to laws and a scientific mind, in hope of creating a mass of well-behaved, productive, though homogenized students.²⁷ Thus, it may be said that to a large extent the purpose of the Modern institutions of the

²⁷ This point is made explicit by Matt Groening in one episode of *The Simpsons* in which students complain about the torturous discomfort of new chiropractic-designed classroom chairs. The teacher responds that they should rest assured; it will only hurt until the young students' bones eventually mould to the shape of the chairs. See *ibid.*, pp. 62.

education is to homogenize their inhabitants, with the benevolent and paternalistic hope of producing social order and social utility.

Thus, the whole method in contemporary educational system as described above is in essence highly similar to the one used in industry, business, military, and government. This system first organizes the students in a mathematically-manageable fashion; then it manipulates the subjects through surveillance and punishment so as to create certain welcomed behaviour while purging various others. Once optimized after such intensive normalization, the youth will become more obedient and productive once they get into the adult society, thereby producing social utility.

To sum up, much like the Modern people, contemporaries also see the world as a dynamic organism. We believe that it is possible to understand, manipulate, and eventually optimize everything in the world with mathematics and scientific methods so as to generate social values. In other words, we suppose that development of the world should be guided by human intelligence.

5.3.4 From Expressionism to Minimalism

Utility is what the contemporary society is all about. Things like science that increases the power and comfort of humanity attracts the full attention of the society, while other issues like cultivation of human nature, metaphysical speculation, and rhetoric that do not saw their importance in rapid decline. This is exactly the opposite of the humanist ideals found in Classical Greece, Renaissance, Reformation, and the Romantic Age. As mentioned in chapter four, it is quite clear from the writings, paintings, music, and religious moods of these humanists that they considered the development of their humanity to be the only essential part of life. For this reason, only those things that dealt with human nature were worth drawing and writing about, while other issues like science

were unimportant since they had no bearing on our conduct and on our morality.

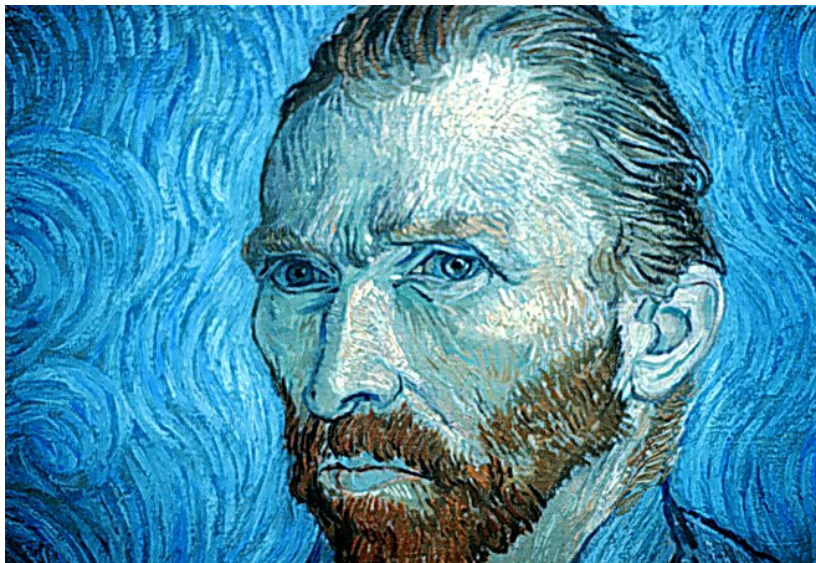
The fateful divergence from humanism began in the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of Modern Age, and continued well into the twentieth century. Needless to say, visual art has cunningly captured this social atmosphere with Impressionism. Yet, Impressionism is only one amongst the many avant-garde artistic movements that upheld the banner of Modernism. And in fact, beginning from the late nineteenth century, a series of artistic movements emerged and quickly seized the dominant position that Impressionism had enjoyed for a couple of decades.²⁸

Initially, it was an artistic force concentrated mainly in Germany in the early twentieth century known as Expressionism that replaced Impressionism as the leading artistic style in Europe. In a sense, similar to Impressionists, Expressionists also based themselves heavily on the optical treatment of the subject. However, the Expressionists were unsatisfied with the formlessness and insubstantiality of the work of the Impressionists and held that the figures of the painter's art should be as solidly and completely moulded as statues. Yet the most important characteristic of Expressionism had to do with the kind of message that the Expressionists sought to express through their paintings. Probably inspired by Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890) the great Expressionist, frenzied painting techniques and extraordinary use of violent and unreal colour were typical amongst Expressionist paintings. Such dramatic style had been deliberately chosen because that was the best vehicle to give loose to one's momentary, passionate, and highly personal emotion. To put it differently, these painters had purposely flouted perspective and other conventional rules of drawing, and utilized aggressive colours and thick stokes as means to express a

²⁸ Given the large number of new artistic movements that had surfaced between Impressionism and now, it is of course impossible to discuss each of them in great details. Therefore, only a few important one will be discussed.

transient and intense subjective emotion. This was the complete reverse of the Renaissance and Romantic paintings, which always sought to carefully delineate some permanent qualities of human nature like victory, true love, and faith in God. In short, the Expressionists used their paintings as an instrument to give loose to their sensation.

Figure 5.4: Self-Portrait of Van Gogh:



Perhaps the most celebrated among all the avant-garde artistic movements was Cubism, jointly created by Georges Braque (1882-1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). One of the chief characteristics of Cubism was that it inherited the tradition of previous avant-garde movements to concentrate on the graphical treatment of the subject. While Cubism focuses on the shape, form and space of the subject, Impressionism and Expressionism focused on the optical treatment. Generally speaking, instead of bounding

themselves to a faithful reproduction of the nature as perceived by human eyes, the Cubists dissected the nature into lines, planes, and a variety of geometrical sections. Such approach, however, was originally invented by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) the great Expressionist who urged other artists to “see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, the cone...”²⁹ In other words, the Cubists regarded everything in the nature merely as geometrical figures to be evaluated with a rational mind, instead of a spiritual entity to be experienced and interpreted with our human nature.

Equally significant was their attempt to present more than one side of a figure on a two-dimensional canvas. They completely rejected the traditional techniques of perspective, the time-honoured theory of art as the imitation of nature, other conventions that artists since Renaissance had endeavoured to follow. Instead, they flattened three-dimensional objects onto the canvas so that different sides of each geometrical shape could be shown simultaneously from various angles. This was the reason why a human body, for instance, was not presented in accordance with a nicely adorned conventional pattern, but as a jumble of arms, legs, heads, and bodies caught in motion and having no arrangement among themselves except that given by the observer. It was mostly this manipulation that makes a Cubist painting incomprehensible at first glance.

Although their technique of breaking down the nature into purely geometrical figures and then flattening it onto a canvas may render Cubist paintings highly abstract and hardly intelligible, this apparent disorder and disorganization were of course not ends in themselves. Rather, they were intended partly to repudiate the conception of art as mere prettiness but instead a rational assessment of the interaction between form and space. Thus, they generated a new purpose for art, namely a mere scientific-type of analysis, thereby changing the course of Western art forever. Picasso

²⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, “Art and Architecture,” in *Progress and World-wide Problems, 1870-1898*, vol. 11, *The New Cambridge Modern History*, pp. 166.

consequently was dubbed as the greatest artist of the twentieth century.

Figure 5.5: Weeping Woman, by Picasso



An even more violent movement of rebellion against traditional standards of art and of life was Surrealism that belonged to the peaceful years between the two World Wars, namely from 1919 to 1939. Deeply influenced by the psychoanalytic works of the Austrian physician Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the aim of the Surrealists was not to represent the world of nature or some qualities of human nature but to portray the workings of our subconscious. Generally

speaking, subconscious is the imagination in a primitive state, free of any socially constructed point of view and convention, and free from the conscious self-constraints of reason and logic. Such effort to give a true picture on our subconscious, in the words of André Breton (1896-1966), the major spokesman of the movement who published *The Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, was a means of reuniting the conscious and unconscious realms of experience so that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world, thereby producing a surreality.

Figure 5.6: Head of a Woman, by Joan Miró



The main difficulty lied in how to eliminate conscious control and gain direct access to our subconscious. Their techniques widely varied. Some of them invented methods based on a certain psychotherapeutic procedure called “free association”; some drew

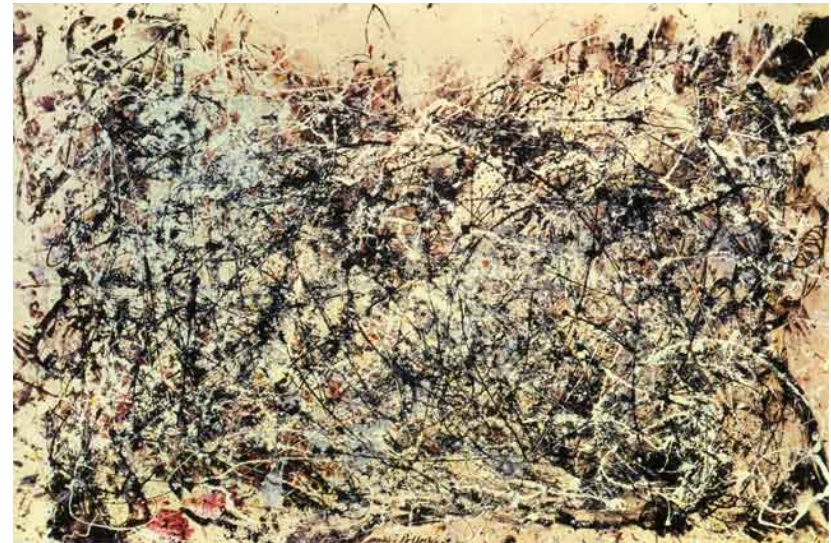
their inspiration from art of children and mad people because of their innocence; others looked into their dreams for ideas because they believed that dreams were thoughts and imaginations in the primitive state, thus part of the untainted unconscious. Still others chose to use hypnosis and even drugs to venture into the unconscious state to extract images, word, feelings and ideas that could not be had in the conscious state.

Given these abnormal sources of inspiration, it should not be surprising that surrealist works were made up of fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter. It was precisely these confusing and startling images that described dream-like scenes and scenarios which would otherwise be impossible in the natural world. In any case, they had no intention to make their artworks logically comprehensible and to follow conventional standards of beauty and form. Instead, they merely sought to bring forth a new vision of our unconscious, a realm of human mind unveiled by the latest fruit of scientific investigation known as psychology. Once again, there was no attempt made to use genuine human experience to interpret the world in human terms.

After the Second World War, Abstract Expressionism flowered in America, which has by then replaced France as the centre of the art world. By rapidly and forcefully applying paint – sometimes even by splashing, dripping or even throwing – with large brushes to their huge canvases, the Abstract Expressionists sought to express their passion purely through the use of form and colour, often with no concrete reference to the real world. For this reason, some of their works hardly appeared to be painting at all, but rather seemed like a hodgepodge of daubs of paint. As Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) a leading figure of the movement once said, “I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them.”³⁰ Such intensity of the colour without outline and with little conscious control serves as the best instrument to freely release one’s emotion without any

restraint, and that was the essence of Abstract Expressionism. It was generally believed such raw and impulsive approach would release the creativity of their unconscious minds, thereby providing an access to the unattainable mysteries of the human psyche. From then on, what mattered above all was whether the act of painting has successfully released and expressed the artist’s transient and subjective feelings, with no attempt made to study and portray them in any detail.

Figure 5.7: Number 1A 1948, by Jackson Pollock

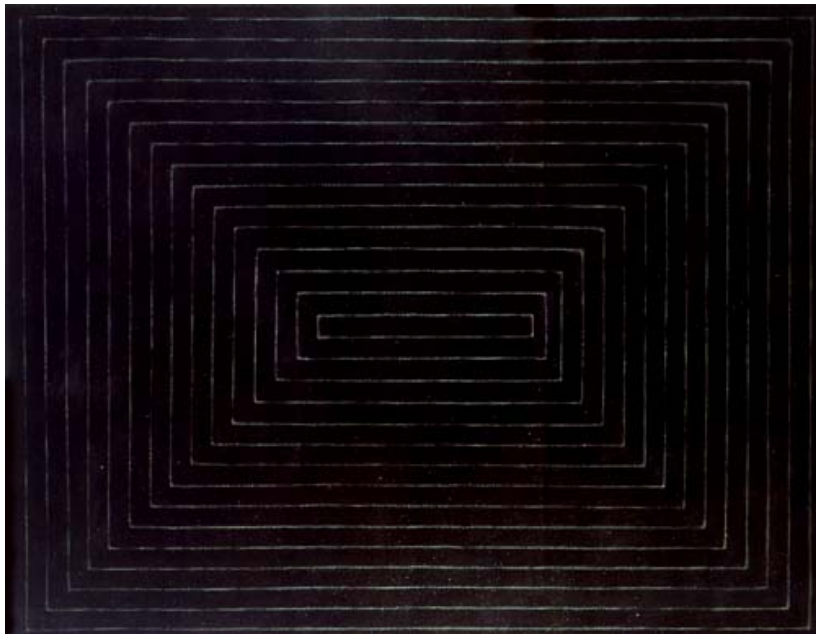


However, soon in the sixties, certain artists known as the Minimalists attacked the excessive emotional content and the lack of aesthetic discipline of Abstract Expressionism. Minimalism emphasized extreme simplification of form through the use of monochromatic palettes of primary colours, mathematically derived grids and linear matrices, minimum texture on surface, and serial

³⁰ Phaidon Press, *The Art Book*, pp. 367

repetitions of objects. Art was then pared down to its essential. Such extreme reductionist style has been deliberately chosen because it represented no object, delineated no experience, expressed no feeling, and captured no movement. Thus, hilarious as it may sound, the whole idea of Minimalism was to create something that meant absolutely nothing, other than the idea to create something itself. As Frank Stella (b. 1936) the founder of Minimalism once famously stated: "My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is what is there...what you see is what you see." No message or analysis of any sort was underneath their painting.

Figure 5.8: Tomlinson Court Park, by Frank Stella



This painting was sold in 1989 at a price of US\$5,060,000.

The brief survey above certainly does not encompass the entire history of Modern art. Many smaller movements like Fauvism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Futurism, Dadaism, Kinetic Art, Vorticism, plus many others are not included. Still, this quick overview is enough to summon a feeling that the development of Western art since the close of the Romantic Age seemed to have followed no particular logic or pattern other than pure randomness. This is a typical instance where one gets stuck when trying to identify certain features common to a mass of widely varied subjects.

Fortunately, with the knowledge derived from the analysis of almost three thousand years of Western history as detailed in the last few chapters, this task becomes almost effortless. First and foremost, Modern artists no longer choose intense Biblical scenes, heroic moments in battlefields or memorable episodes in the Classics as the theme of their artworks. Instead, trivial scenes on everyday life or fantastic settings in a hallucinated mind become the primary choice of subjects, if there is really a subject at all. This shift later proved to represent a complete redefinition of the purpose of art. No longer does art play an active role in our society. To recall, arts in the Classical Age, Renaissance, and the Romantic Age were educational and were not only for the sake of beauty. They instructed people what it really meant by stately qualities, religious experience, ideals of morality, development of emotion, thus they taught us what it really meant to be a true human. In short, they were instruments to develop our human nature.

Once in the Modern Age, however, the picture looked totally different. Art adopted myriad new ends, ranging from a scientific analysis on nature and a release of passion, to a mere pursuit of beauty and a study of subconscious. Common to all these new purposes was that art ceased to serve as the instrument in the development of our humanity, which after all attracted little interest from Modern and contemporary people who live in a utilitarian society.

Another point shared by all Modern Art is that art became individualistic. No longer do artists attempt to encompass moral ideals that are civilization-wide, if not humanity-wide, but instead suffice themselves to what is inside their personal vision. For example, in the case of Impressionism and Cubism, the focus was on the personal treatment on light of a certain trivial scene; in Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism, the emphasis was on the release of one's personal passion and subconscious; in Surrealism, the stress was on the delineation of one's subconscious world. This so-called individualization of art represented yet another striking similarity with Antiquity. Readers with good memory shall recall that before Classical art degraded into Roman art, it had passed through a phase of trivialization and individualization in the Hellenistic Age. Visual arts in the Hellenistic Age began to be introspective, to concern with individual traits and moods, instead of expressing an ideal from Homer's works. In short, individualization is yet another feature shared by all Modern art.

Especially significant was the coming of Minimalism. As noted above, the Minimalists attempted to create works that express no emotion, that release no passion, that depict no objects, and that examine nothing in scientific terms. Needless to say, such style contains no educational, expressional, or even aesthetic goal. The only thing to be found in Minimalist painting is the concept of a geometrical pattern. At last, artists were free from the fetters of tradition that obliged them to convey a concrete meaning or message through their works.

To sum up, as noted earlier in this chapter, Modern art beginning with Impressionism represented a breach with the tradition since Renaissance, the tradition that believed that artistic imagination truly mirrors the nature and has instructive values. After having stripped itself of all humanist purposes, Modern Art have gone on to adopt all kinds of non-humanist ends like release of one's passion or creation of beauty, and finally stripped itself of all concrete ends. In a sense, Modern art seemed to progress towards its own self-

annihilation, similar to the eventual fate of Classical Art in the late Roman Age.

5.3.5 Popular Culture and the Contemporary World

The above brief survey on Modern Art brought us the last piece of information required to formulate a new interpretation on contemporary world as in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since the beginning of this book, it has been repeatedly emphasized that a thorough understanding on any civilization must not solely base itself on economic, technological, political, or other material determinants; instead, what is equally critical, to say the least, in such an analysis is to comprehend what is most fundamental to the mankind, namely our human nature. And, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, art is well-nigh the single most reliable indicator on the condition of human nature of a particular period of time. This is what makes the upcoming analysis on popular art central to the understanding of the contemporary world as a whole.

When discussing contemporary art as in the twenty-first century, one has no choice but to focus on the so-called popular culture as briefly described in chapter two of this book. Such decision of solely targeting at popular culture when analyzing contemporary world may readily summon considerable objection. Firstly, the highly commercialized entertainment industry is far from being the only remaining form of art nowadays, as the fashion design industry, the architecture industry, the interior design industry, and even the manufacturing industry often claim to be an integral component of modern art. Yet the variety of the entertainment industry has the edge of providing vocal, visual and literary information on modern art, while the other are largely confined to visual.

Secondly, Classical art are still far from its eventual extinction, yet no one can argue that by definition Classical art is a

genuine product of the pre-twentieth century Europe. Ever since the coming of Impressionism, the great period of production of Classical art has ended already, to be replaced by masses of so-called avant-garde opuses. Giving its relative decrease in popularity vis-à-vis modern art and popular art, it is fair to claim that Classical art is now in a defensive stance: not striving for more growth and breakthroughs, but for a mere survival. This is almost an exactly replica of the late Roman Age where study on Greek literature still existed but where the entire Roman society had already been absorbed by the early Christian culture. It is difficult to discard an expanding culture that is undoubtedly a product of the contemporary world in favour of a gradually shrinking culture that belonged to a passed age.

Thirdly, a handful amount of people, mostly fine artists and enthusiasts of Classical culture, all hold certain negative comment on popular culture and feel reluctant to treat it as an integral part of the mainstream art. Nonetheless, as shall be shown shortly below, popular culture shares important features with the various Modern fine art movements, and it is only by considering popular culture as a legitimate variation of Modern art that the true meaning of popular culture shall be unveiled.

Given the reasons listed above, let's re-examine the Twins phenomenon using the new knowledge derived from the analysis of three thousand years of history. In a sense, Hong Kong popular culture in the recent past as represented by Twins can be considered as a successor to the list of the so-called avant-garde Modern art depicted earlier in this chapter, as it inherits many of their basic elements. The most important feature that Twins and other popular artists share with Modern fine artists is that they are both passive by nature meaning that both lack the active role that art once played in the shaping of human nature in Renaissance. To be specific, while Impressionism and several others belong to the category of aestheticism that aims at consolation of our spirit, popular culture is similarly meant to be purely entertaining. Broadly speaking,

nowadays something that is entertaining implies something that provides the needed satisfaction in passing time, something that relieves tension, and something that helps to relax and stop thinking about problems in life.³¹ No question that popular artists are meant to be, or at least is not treated by the audience as, idols to imitate in the course of shaping one's humanity. In short, the only truth in popular culture is that it offers entertainment and up to entertainment, just as Impressionist paintings offer beauty and up to beauty.

Not only is popular music not meant to play an active role in the shaping of human nature, but the music itself lacks any concern of human nature as well. This second feature of popular music becomes clear when one carefully inspects the apparently simple and naïve style found in Twins' music, which in fact possesses important traces of modernity. As mentioned in chapter two, the rhythm found in Twins' songs is very childish in that it lacks the level of sophistication found in Classical music. Moreover, their plain and unexciting rhythm fails to arouse any grand emotion like true love and courage in war from the audience. The only impression that their music summons is that it bears no heavy emotion or any complex harmony or melody, thereby providing a lovely musical amusement for the spectators.

Attentive readers should have already noticed that a number of Modern artistic movements bear a similar set of features. While the Impressionists, Cubists and Minimalists all sufficed to depict a scene or an idea through simple geometrical shapes and stripped away all sentimentality and sensuous connotations, Twins' music similarly abandoned all humanist concern regarding our human nature and satisfied itself with a pleasant rhythm in simple harmony. To put it in different terms, like the various Modern visual art movements in which the visual properties of a scene were the only things to be considered by the artists, acoustic properties that appeal to physical ear alone were the only considerations in Twins' music.

³¹ Alan Wells, "Popular Music: Emotional Use and Management," in *Journal of Popular Culture* 24 (Summer 1990): pp. 105-6.

This coldly detached and non-humanist experiment in music has much in common with Impressionism, Cubism and Minimalism, all conveying the sardonic message of nowadays human beings who are mere automatons, manipulated by their own physical urges or by the grim hand of a mechanical fate. It is the kind of music for purely aesthetic purpose, meaning that it is something that generates up to a beauty of form and rhythm with no attempt to convey any grand emotion, let alone any educational and humanist message.

The story is akin with the lyrics in Twins' songs as it is close to the ideals of pure poetry depicted earlier in this section. As mentioned in chapter two, the lyrics found in Twins' songs make no attempt to either express any grand emotion or deep feeling, or to become an instrument in the cultivation of one's human nature. In fact, it is not even meant to convey a concrete message or a story, as lines in the lyrics are broken, thereby lack the coherence necessary to have real narrative power. The only apparent feature of the lyrics is that it rhymes in every single line, which produces an acoustic harmony that is pleasant to listen as long as one does not try to dig a meaning out of it. Such superficial beauty, like the melody of their songs, produces pure aesthetic values.

In fact, to be fair, there is more than pure rhyming in the lyrics. Considering the lyrics of Twins given in chapter two again, which in fact possesses a theme. If one leaves aside the harsh comment on its literary values and carefully reads through the entire lyrics, it is apparent that its author had chosen a set of vocabulary that is loosely connected together and then spread it through the lyrics. As such, the original atmosphere of the theme is broken into many elements, leaving it to the listener to recompose from these broken lines a certain atmosphere. This method known as abstraction that demands interpretation of data on the side of the spectator is highly similar to that of Impressionism and Cubism.

Even in the choice of theme does popular music resemble to Modern art. It abandons religious theme, heroic incident, episode in

the Classics, and all kinds of scenes that may arouse any grand emotion like true love, religious experience, courage in war, and others. Instead, like its predecessors in Modern Art, it limits itself to trivial moments and insignificant theme in urban life, like the present scene when someone asks a child to wake up and dance in the song quoted in chapter two. As such, it will invoke the least amount of connection to our human nature and inner spiritual life.

Their appearance tells pretty much the same story. Everyone agrees that it is impossible to mathematically rank people according to their physical beauty, yet there are still certain criteria that most people would agree that will make someone physical appealing. This may include a certain height and weight, a certain ideal ratio of limbs and body, and a certain distribution of our four sensual organs on our face. Those combinations of ratios that approach the ideals make for good appearance, while those that do not are less appealing. This is the whole secret to appearance. Through the magic of make-up and costume, the two young ladies in Twins become two human beings that are physically appealing. Such aesthetic values make it an enjoyable journey when looking at them. Unfortunately, this is as far as their physical beauty allows them to go, as there is really not much content underneath their beauty. Few people nowadays will disagree that nowadays' popular idols do not really look like a human being in the humanist sense, meaning that at least in front of their consumers they strip themselves of all their genuine human nature and become emotionless automatons solely built for entertainment purposes and not idols whose humanity and spirituality are to be imitated. This again corresponds to the aestheticism since the day of Impressionism, where a piece of art must possess as little humanity as possible and restricts itself to unpolluted beauty.

The Modern spirit even found expression in their never-ending switch in style. It is a common knowledge that nowadays' popular artists must constantly switch their style lest giving an old-fashion feeling to the market. According, it is not uncommon that

artists would take on a different look in every single picture, video, movie, TV show, and concert. This practice matches the technique of Impressionism that produces dynamism through the jittering and unstable colouring. In other words, where the Impressionists employed all kinds of colouring skills to produce an impression of dynamism, popular artists relied on a constant shift in style.

In fact, it is possible to argue that the entire industry is filled with dynamism, based on the rate of elimination and replacement. The days when an artist or a piece of music can survive in the market for several centuries, like the case with Classical music, are gone. Instead, it appears to everyone that a certain artist may only survive in the market for less than a few years, while a particular song may not last for more than a few months. Every few months, new songs of the same artists came to the market, making their old songs obsolete. And for every few years, a whole new generation of artists would enter the market and making the older generation obsolete. This readily creates an impression that, like the ever-evolving nature, the current moment of the industry is always ready to be replaced by the next evolution.

Above is the new interpretation of Twins, which one should really use the word “avant-garde” or “modern” instead of junk and non-sense to describe them, as it is simply the latest culmination of modernity. In fact, simply recall the days when the romanticists once discarded Impressionism as insolent provocation and criticized it from every possible angle, and it shall become clear that the prevailing harsh comment on Twins and other contemporary popular artists are all made by people who are not yet accustomed to modernity. It shall not surprise me if the prevailing music twenty years later will adopt more modern elements, such that the current generation of Twins’ fans, who by then will become parents, will find the latest music difficult to absorb.

This so-called Twins phenomenon is not unique to Hong Kong, as it has already been mentioned in chapter two. Elsewhere in

the world, most noticeably in Japan, United Kingdom and United States who has been leading the modern world since the end of the wars, similar trend of development in their entertainment industry took place in the last decade, as more and more singers falling into the category of Twins flooded the market with their music that genuinely belong to the modern world. Specifically, though they are not all identical and share exactly the same set of features, it is nevertheless apparent that they are all meant to serve for entertainment ends, that their lyrics become “abstract”, and that overall they have lost every bit of humanist elements that used to fill up every piece of artwork centuries ago.

It must not be misunderstood, however, that the sort of popular music as represented by Twins dominates the entire entertainment industry. There in fact exists another category of popular music that substantially differs from that to which Twins belongs. That is the category of rap, hard metal, and rock music. If one says that the purely aesthetic music of Twins is close to the ideal of Impressionism and Minimalism, then the other category can said to be close to Abstract Expressionism. For people who do not like the heavy beats, the lack of melodies and the repetitiveness so often found in music of this category, this category of music may hardly be considered to be music but closer to being just non-sense noise. Readers with good memory, however, shall recall that this is exactly the kind of impression that Abstract Expressionist paintings may give to people unused to it, as they appear at most to be a hodgepodge of paints randomly spilled on the canvas. Similar to Abstract Expressionism, rap, rock and heavy metal music never attempted to convey any concrete message through the music. Instead, it should be apparent that it is at most a release of passion through the most anaesthetic manner. Using a Classical, Romantic, or aesthetic viewpoint to comment on it is not only unfair, but also completely misses the essence of this purely expressive music.

Even in the latest fashion found in interior design may one identify the same set of modern ideas so often found in modern art.

Simply take a look at any magazine on the latest trends in interior design, and it should not take much effort to notice that Minimalism is presently the mainstream. Every part of furniture, whether it be the handle of a wardrobe, the surface of a sofa, or even the shape of a computer, has been reduced to the basic geometrical form like perfect sphere, perfect cube, and perfect line, while the colouring is usually restricted to one or two. The overall atmosphere that such style summons, similar to most other Modern art, is a sense of emotionless and machine-type of indifference, designed exclusively for aesthetic purposes. This perfectly corresponds to the basic elements of Minimalism. Most important, similar to the case with popular artists, every few years a new style in interior design would emerge and make the previous styles obsolete. Therefore, it is necessary to keep up-to-date and constantly follow the latest trend. In fact, it is possible to observe a similar story in the fashion industry, the mobile phone industry, car industry, the home appliance industry, the toy industry, plus many others. In all of these industries, it has become increasingly important in the last few decades to envelop a product with a Minimalist and emotionless design and a short life-cycle. The parallel with modernity is complete.

One can even extend the current analysis to comic, one of the most widely read types of literature for many youth around the globe nowadays. That the absolutely majority of comic exclusively serves for entertainment purposes is already a common knowledge and requires no repetition. After all, most of them are filled with scenes of love, violence or amusement, with no intention to serve as the moral guidance for their audience but solely to entertain and excite them. The drawing skill of those comic writers tells pretty much the same story, as their unique comical style depicted in chapter two is not intended to facilitate the depiction of one's inner spiritual state as do the various techniques used in Romantic opuses; instead, their highly simplified and at the same time exaggeration drawing style is meant to restraint all but the passing mood of the character in the plainest manner. In short, comic, no doubt a genuine

product of the modern society, shares the same set of features found in other variations of modern art.

The story is once again similar in the case of movies, yet another indispensable component in nowadays popular culture. Together with comic, popular music, and most of the television programs, popular movie is another most criticized piece of popular culture. This is mostly because most of the popular movies are about sex, violence, amusement, love, and the future world. In some extreme cases, the scenes of violence, amusement, and sex replace the actual plot and emerge as the unique selling point of the movie. Needless to say, these movies serve again for purely instantaneous entertainment purposes.

Certainly, not all movies fall into this category, as there in fact exists in movie and literature a certain style known as Realism. These writers are deeply concerned about various social and political problems typical in a modern society like poverty, prostitution, equality, and crime, and also about the psychology of man when facing hardship of life. For this end, they heavily rely on philosophy, science and especially psychology that help them to probe into the roots of the social problems and also into the hidden mechanics of human mind. Thus, as in the case of all avant-garde artistic movements, no longer do these Realists use the primordial vision and natural human feelings to interpret the world in order to give a valid picture of our human experience; instead, artistic imagination atrophies into rational reflection on secular life, which only allow them to unveil the sweets and bitters of modern life. Moreover, these Realist productions are often perceived as calls to focus on the improvement of social well-being, completely different from the Romantic call of developing one's natural feeling so as to experience life. In short, Realism is yet another genuine product of the modern world.

To sum up, given that contemporary popular culture shares the same set of features as do the various avant-garde artistic

movements, there is no doubt that this widely criticized culture is far from being an isolate incidence, but instead a mere reflection of our modern society, which is deeply rooted in the general movement of science in the mid-nineteenth century, thanks to the general acceptance of scientific knowledge, the Industrial Revolution, and the new urban life, which together helped to shape the Modern mind. This mid-century change, in turn, was rooted in the seventeenth century scientific revolution, eighteenth century Enlightenment Age, and the concept of growth from the Romantic Age. Hence, modernity is the root of our contemporary popular culture that currently envelops us from every possible corner.

5.3.6 The Mysterious Future

With all the above facts and theories, it becomes effortless to give a new interpretation on the current situation of Hong Kong. Rise above the economic figures, rise above the everyday political events, rise above the national and racial boundaries, and rise above the restriction of time, so as to gain access to the secret rhythm of history. Under the scrutiny using macro outlook of history, the wide success of Twins and popular culture as depicted in chapter two becomes a symbol of being a modernized city. Few areas in the world can compete with Hong Kong in terms of how the Modern ideas are widely accepted. It is in Hong Kong, amongst several other places like United States, Western Europe, and Northeast Asia, where Modernity achieves its culmination: anything that does not bring in power is neglected, while everything that does is embraced by everyone. In other words, economic and social life superseded religious and spiritual life as being the main concerns of humanity, implying the abandonment of our ancestors' primordial interest in human nature and the celebration of acquisition of comfort and power. Modern people are now fully attached to the secular society. For this reason, it should not be surprising that popular culture and the accompanying aestheticism in fashion, the latest creations of

human being to express, has now firmly embraced the Hong Kong society.

It is no exaggeration that the current situation of the world highly resembles to that of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago. During a period of unprecedented prosperity, a new kind of truth emerged and replaced the existing humanist outlook of the world. In the case of the Roman Age, the new truth was the truth of early Christianity, which gave the world the truth of faith; and in the case of the Modern world, it is the truth of science, both of which indefinitely postpones the interest of human nature.

Does the theory say that the current *Pax Americana* would soon end, to be replaced by centuries and centuries of chaos? To say so is no doubt over-stretching the theory to an absurd extends. All that the theory proposed in this book foretell is that as long as the modernization process continues, the world will be increasingly stripped of all her humanist tradition, meaning that we shall lose all interest in developing and portraying our human nature – our most precious gift that makes us a genuine human being. Eventually, probably within the next few hundred years, the world would enter into an utterly Modernized period where only things that increase our power receive attention, while everything else is thrown behind – just like how the Dark Age Europeans once abandoned all Greek and Roman culture and lived in their own world of early Christian faith. One may wonder if that day should be welcomed or not.

In Cinderella, the Prince shortly used the glass slipper left behind by Cinderella to bring her to the Palace. This makes it tempting to hope: when will the Prince arrived in Hong Kong and brought a new spring to the city?