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## Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of

# Modern/Modernity/Modernism

## Susan Stanford Friedman

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What is *modernity*? What is or was *modernism*? Why is the energetic, expanding, multidisciplinary field of modernist studies so filled with contestation over the very ground of study? Definitional activities are fictionalizing processes, however much they sound like rational categorization. As such, I will begin with three stories, allegorized but rooted in my own experience in an evolving field.<sup>1</sup>

### Story 1: Where Have All the Rebels Gone?

Imagine a young woman starting graduate school in 1965 in an American land grant university. Remember the suburban dream of the 1950s for middle-class (white) girls: the penny loafers and saddle shoes; the poodle skirts and prom chiffon; the cheerleaders and Elvis screamers; college for the MRS degree; the station wagon and four kids. NO books. NO art. NO ideas. NO passion. Conformity was the name of the game. Conformity and materialism. Then. The first butts of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Fuck. Shit. Sex. Pot. Buttons. Pierced ears. Long hair. Unisex style. Civil Rights. Vietnam. Pigs. Feminism. Gay Rights. Welfare Rights. Union Rights. "What was modernism" to a graduate student in English and American literature in the heady days of the 1960s? Modernism was rebellion. Modernism was "make it new."<sup>2</sup> Modernism was resistance, rupture. To its progenitors. To its students. Modernism was the antidote to the poison of tradition, obligation. **[End Page 493]**

### Story 2: What Does a Cyberpunk Really Want?

Picture an aging scholar in 1995, past the half-century mark, entering into her first graduate seminar on modernism in a land grant university. "What was modernism?" she asks. A circle of eyes and silences. A couple to the side shift uncomfortably. She has cropped purple hair and kohled eyes. He wears fishnet stockings and thick buckled Pilgrim heels. A tidy tail of silky golden hair flows down his back. So thin in black, so pale in white face, they are their own shadows. They know "what modernism was." Modernism was elitism. Modernism was the Establishment. "High Culture" lifting its skirts against the taint of the "low," the masses, the popular. Modernism was the supreme fiction, the master narrative, the great white hope. To its Po-Mo descendents, Modernism is the enemy. Postmodernism is the antidote to the poison of tradition, obligation.

### Story 3: What's a Poor Student to Do?

Listen in on an exchange between two scholars, the one graying and the other balding in the wisdom of their seniorities--she a cultural critic, he a social scientist. Children of the 1960s, teachers of the 1990s. It is 1995 as their manuscripts cross through snail mail. "What was modernism?" they ask, both acknowledging it as a historical phenomenon, but neither willing to assert that it is fully over and done with. For both, modernism both was and is. But *what* was modernism? She knows. It is the (illusory) break with the past, a willed forgetting of tradition, continuity, order. It is the embrace of chaos. It is the crisis of representation, fragmentation, alienation. It is indeterminacy, the rupture of certainty--material and symbolic. It is the poetics of modernity--change--and the aesthetic inscriptions thereof. (*Pace* cyberpunks, for whom modernism no longer "is" as it recedes into the deadness of postmodernism's past.)

He knows too. Modernism is state planning. Modernism is totalization, centralized system. Modernism is

the Enlightenment's rational schemata. "Progress"--"Science"-- "Reason"-- "Truth." Modernism is the ideology of post-Renaissance modernity--conquest--and the inscriptions thereof. (*Pace* cyborgs, modernism still lives in the danger of ever-forming centralized hegemones and utopian totalitarianisms.)

**Moral of the Stories:** Just what **IS** modernism in an exchange where the word means not just different things, but precisely opposite things?

\* \* \*

The opposition of meanings produced over time (from Story 1 to Story 2) morphs into a binary of oppositions existing across space (Story 3). In toto, the stories represent a conjuncture of temporal and spatial oppositions. So. Let's move from storytelling to another kind of conjuncture: parataxis--the juxtaposition of things...

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