1920s: *Les Années Folles*?

Week 12 – Lecture 1

15 March 2008
1920s: A response to Collective Trauma???

1920-29: Disorder or Order?

- "The Crazy Years" [Les Années Folles]:
  - a time of craziness anything goes” [The Roaring Twenties]
  - OR . . .

- "A Call to Order”:
  - a time of trauma when people tried to re-order the world

SEE THE 1920S AS BOTH
- “CRAZY” AND ORDERED:

  - Yes: a time of surrealism, gin (at least in Europe!), jazz, the Charleston

  - No: a time when people felt a need to retreat to “essentials” and draw thick boundaries between what seemed too fluid/crazy
National trauma defined:
“a collective encounter with chaos . . . A disruption of a collective system of meaning”

The social edifices that bind men and women together into a system of meaning frequently are thought of as imperishable. Social order, however, is always a fragile entity. Through the unfolding of traumatic events, social landscapes may be disrupted by epichoric and volcanic proportions. Cracks in the system may continue to widen until internal and external pressures can no longer be contained. Under these conditions, the social order is replaced by chaos, and a great deal of repair work is required. Social systems may then be seen as recurrently undergoing a process of collapse and rebuilding. The resolution of crises are replaced by new sacred meanings that seek to restore continuity in the social realm.

Under conditions of national trauma, the moral underpinnings of a society are subjected to close scrutiny. Volcano-like disruptions call into question the qualities and attributes of social life. Men and women strive for new ways to relate to each other, and everyday hopes and aspirations are temporarily put on hold. Restoring a sense of order and coherence becomes a necessary societal response to conditions of trauma. Just as traumatic events result in a fragmented community, a great deal of repair work may be necessary to discover new forms of social glue for binding people together into a shared form of membership and belonging.

Shaping a National Identity

The cumulative effects of national traumas are of central importance in forging the collective identity of any given group of people. Among Ameri
The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went, And took the fire with him, and a knife. And as they sojourned both of them together, Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father, Behold the preparations, fire and iron, But where the lamb for this burnt-offering? Then Abram bound the youth with belts and strops, And builded parapets and trenches there, And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven, Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, Neither do anything to him. Behold, A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns; Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son.
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

“Rites of Spring”

Primitive: village elders choose adolescent virgins—>
human sacrifice—>
blood sanctifies [le sacre] earth—>
brings good harvest—>
people are fed—>
village prospers
Radical shift in cultural meaning [“software”] of
*Le sacre du printemps*

- **1913**: Primitivism --- a *celebration* of our most primal instincts; let the lid off the repression!; a nostalgic yearning for the days when old men sacrificed youth for the regeneration of the earth in spring
- **1918**: Primitivism --- a *horror* of what happens when instincts are un-repressed: the sacrificial slaughter of millions of youth by the corrupt old men.
- **THE GREAT WAR = A SACRIFICE.**

II. Aesthetic Solution: “High Modernism”
Formalism = *anti-realism*: the desire to do away with ornamentation; get beneath the “masks” of culture down to the eternal “true” order of things.
What makes this a leap into the 20th c.?

1) FORM – “CUBISM” -- not sense “impressions” – a turn to “universals”/“ideas” [what is unseen]
A. Piet Mondrian: *De Stijl*

Formalism / Geometry = “universal” and “eternal” significance

Piet Mondrian, *Lonely House* [1898-1900]
Mondrian, *Windmill by Sunlight* [1908]

Mondrian, *Still Life with Ginger Pot II* [1912]
Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow-Green* [1920]

1912 --- 1920
Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* [1921]

Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* [1922]
Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* [1927]
Now what?

Mondrian, *Composition with Two Lines* [1931]
1898 – 1920 - 1930

Cultural significance of progressive abstraction / turn to “pure forms” [formalism]

1920s: “Rappel à l’ordre”  [A call to order]

- In times of danger / trauma, a need to “purify” --- to draw strict boundaries between “clean” and “unclean”
- Post-Great War: shifting boundaries--- uncertain identities
B. Picasso, *Three Musicians* [1921]

Late cubism
C. Picasso, *Three Women at the Spring* [1921]

Return to FORM: geometrical; eternal; RELIABLE

Neo-classicism

1921
D. Le Corbusier: “International Style”  
(Dream for Paris, 1920s)

Return to pure form: eliminate ornamentation / corruption / bric-a-brac
• Stuyvesant Town, New York

• Top: Le Corbusier’s *Dream of Paris*

• Bottom: Achieved design for Stuyvesant Town, New York
Le Corbusier, *Villa at Poissy* [1929-31]
1800s bourgeois \(\leftrightarrow\) 1920s Bauhaus

E. Bauhaus: reunion of “art” and “everyday life”
Bauhaus: hybridity of modern and pre-modern

- PRE-MODERN: made by *artisans* [think Marx: self-expression *chef-d’oeuvre*: product no longer alienated from maker]

- MODERN: sleek geometrical simplicity
Cultural meaning of High Modernism? :
PURE FORM: Getting behind the mask / ornamentation to WHAT IS LASTING (ETERNAL)
Igor Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex* (1927)

From Primitivism to Neo-Classicism

Radical shift in cultural meaning [*“software”*] of *Le sacre du printemps*

- **1913**: Primitivism --- a *celebration* of our most primal instincts; let the lid off the repression!; a nostalgic yearning for the days when old men sacrificed youth for the regeneration of the earth in spring
- **1918**: Primitivism --- a *horror* of what happens when instincts are un-repressed: the sacrificial slaughter of millions of youth by the corrupt old men.
- **THE GREAT WAR = A SACRIFICE.**
Central problem left by Great War:

- The liberal “old men of Europe” killed millions of youth for goals like 200 yards of land -->
- How can you justify this sacrifice of a generation?
- It is a pollution.

“Rites of Spring”

- Primitive: village elders choose adolescent virgins --> human sacrifice --> blood sanctifies [le sacre] earth --> brings good harvest --> people are fed --> village prospers
“Rites of Purification”
An anthropological necessity found in all cultures:

- Ancient rituals --- after contamination with blood [e.g., menstruation; childbirth; touching a corpse] --- a ritual purification necessary to “purify” the “pollution”
**Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex* [1926/7]**

French libretto by Jean Cocteau who also wrote *A Call to Order*

In Ciceronian [not church]
Latin: “Eternal CLASSICAL Rome” [e.g., of Cicero]
Translated by Jean Danielou, a young Jesuit, later a Cardinal

**Story:** Thebes is polluted by Oedipus’ sins [murders his father (parricide) and sleeps with his mother]; needs to be purified; rips out his eyes – he has SEEN things he should not see; this purifies Thebes --- “restores anthropological boundary markers” (between sons and fathers; sons and mothers)

**Metaphor:** Europe has been polluted by the “sacrificed generation”; needs purification
Narrator says: “you won’t understand Latin because it’s a dead language

No problem: what’s important is that it gets us back to Classical <cf. Picasso!> eternal unchanging forms of Truth.

Purify us of the pollution killing our nation!