



Modernité and its mythology

Modernité e sua mitologia

Dr. Christophe Longbois-Canil

Como citar:

LONGBOIS-CANIL, C. Modernité and its mythology. *MODOS*. Revista de História da Arte. Campinas, v. 1, n.1, p.56-69, jan. 2017. Disponível em: <<http://www.publionline.iar.unicamp.br/index.php/mod/article/view/729>>

Imagem: Exposição "Picasso e seu tempo", Museu Berggruen, Berlim, maio de 2015; foto: M.F.M. Couto.

Modernité and its mythology

Modernité e sua mitologia

Dr.Christophe Longbois-Canil *

Abstract

Too often, the term of modernité is used without a clear sense when historians write about the modernité of the greats painters of the nineteenth century, as Édouard Manet or Vincent van Gogh for example. This article wants to give a definition of modernité as Baudelaire thought it, i.e. a concept, then show that our vision of this term is constructed from the discourse of the art critics of the nineteenth century. In fact, what we call today modernité is only a mythology.

Keywords

Modernité; Modernity; Aesthetic; French Painting; Charles Baudelaire; Criticism; Salon.

Resumo

Muito frequentemente, o termo *modernité* é usado sem sentido claro quando historiadores escrevem sobre a *modernité* dos grandes pintores do século XIX, como por exemplo Édouard Manet ou Vincent van Gogh. Esse artigo pretende dar um significado para *modernité* da forma como Baudelaire pensou o termo, como um conceito, e mostrar em seguida que nossa visão desse termo foi construída a partir do discurso da crítica de arte do século XIX. De fato, o que chamamos de *modernité* hoje é apenas uma mitologia.

Palavras-chave

Modernité; Modernidade; Estética; Pintura Francesa; Charles Baudelaire; Crítica; Salão.

Many art historians use the word "Modernité"¹ without giving a clear definition. When they do, which is rare, they agree that Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) as the inventor of the concept. Sometimes some cite Balzac as the inventor of the substantive. Yet, even by their definition, modernity remains a vague term, generic, that is characterized by that which is considered modern. So when historians write about the modernité of Édouard Manet or Van Gogh, considered to be the paradigm of painting that is considered "modern", this "avant-garde" characterized by its "modernité". In fact, in the absence of a real definition of the term, we say nothing. We merely enunciate a generality without substance.

A historical modernity

Thus when employing the term of "modernité" we should clearly state what is in question, that is to say if used in an historic or an aesthetic sense. For its historical sense, the term is defined by what belongs to modern times. In this context, historians distinguish between several modernities. For example that of Denis Richet (1973: 13), which in the context of France, distinguishes a first modernity beginning in the year 1450, that is to say with the Renaissance, and until at least 1640, if not 1680 (depending on the regions). From this first period of modernity follows, according to Richet, a classical age and the age of Enlightenment. In a broader context, this first modernity begins with the modern era, i.e. in 1453 with the fall of Constantinople, or in 1492 with the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, according to historians. A second era begins in 1789 with the forces that will shape the nineteenth century (Baudrillard, 2005). Ultimately, this modernity is not a chronologically defined period, but the expression of a dynamic grouping of a set of technical progressions, aspirations, research and values that will determine the course of history of Western civilization. So modernity used in an historical sense is distinct from the concept developed by Baudelaire because it is anchored in a process of improvement of mankind, while Baudelaire himself condemns the idea of progress. This is why we must make the distinction between modernity and modernité. In this case we are not concerned with developing the various aspects of an historic "modernity", because this article focuses mainly on exploring the aesthetic dimension of this term.

The concept of modernité

In 1863, Charles Baudelaire published an essay the drafting of which dates back to 1859-1860. This essay, entitled *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, appears in the editions of *Le Figaro* from the 26th and the 29th of November, and the 3rd of December. In 1868, the full text will be published in the collection *L'Art romantique*. The essay is composed of thirteen parts, the fourth is entitled "modernité". However, even though the text is published in 1863, we must consider that it is the fruit of a long gestation, presumably circumscribed between 1845 and 1860, i.e. from the criticism of the Salon of 1845, where Baudelaire quickly evokes "l'héroïsme de la vie moderne" (Baudelaire, 2005: 67), until he finishes writing his essay. This concept is therefore constructed from an aesthetic reflection on contemporary art but also from common concerns of the world of art and literature of his time, as we can see in the text devoted to the Salon of 1836 by Frederic Mercey (1803-1860), undoubtedly read by Baudelaire, or from conversations that he had with Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) (Longbois-Canil, 2016: 189-196).

In this essay, Baudelaire takes as pretext the activity of the painter Constantin Guys (1802-1892) to give substance to his idea of the painter of *modernité*. The writer presents the artist as immersed in the constant movement of the modern urban world and where he seeks "ce quelque chose qu'on nous permettra d'appeler

la modernité ; car il ne se présente pas de meilleur mot pour exprimer l'idée en question". (Baudelaire, 2005: 354)

In his quest for modernité, the goal that the artist establishes for himself is "de dégager de la mode ce qu'elle peut contenir de poétique dans l'historique, de tirer l'éternel du transitoire". (Baudelaire, 2005: 354) Fashion is defined as a tendency to create that which is fleeting so that it can not be copied thereby maintaining a visible and justifiable distinction between social orders. Until now, fashion was primarily considered an expression of vulgar tastes and strictly material of the time and, in particular, of the bourgeois way of life. On the contrary, for Baudelaire, the expression of the latest fashion represents the vitality of the time and is a reflection of it. The inherent dynamic of life is reflected in the movement of fashion: constantly changing, never static. In this sense, the continuous renewal of forms also directly influences the material representations and the artistic language that must seize a fleeting vision of the present. It is in this fleeting reality of fashion that the beautiful appears because, as Baudelaire wrote in his essay, in which the first part is entitled *Le beau, la mode et le bonheur*: "l'idée que l'homme se fait du beau s'imprime dans tout son ajustement, chiffonne ou raidit son habit, arrondit ou aligne son geste, et même pénètre subtilement, à la longue, les traits de son visage. L'homme finit par ressembler à ce qu'il voudrait être". (Baudelaire, 2005: 344) The beautiful is part of human nature because it is the product of that nature from which it emanates, and from nature itself, and it is also an expression of nature. At the same time, the beautiful has real effects on mankind because it is an integral part of life and allows man to improve, to reach another idea of himself. With Baudelaire, the beautiful has not only an aesthetic function, he also gives to it an ontological dimension. Baudelaire's beautiful is not the same as those of classical aesthetics, i.e. absolute and timeless, but for him it is also rendered on a human scale, a part of life. So when Baudelaire writes: "la modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable" (Baudelaire, 2005: 355), he reconciles opposites: the ideal and the real, the general and the particular. In academic theories and the doxa of this time (Quincy, 1823 and 1837), these concepts are considered irreconcilable and diametrically opposed. Modernité is on the side of the ephemeral, the transitory, but it is only half an aesthetic that is conceived as double-sided, where one of the components does not exist without the other. However, with Baudelaire, the idea of the eternal and immutable has nothing to do with any transcendent ideal, as in conventional conceptions, it is the idea that man makes of himself as a subject, and the subject as a concept, an ideal to which man must aim. Escaping historicity by its nature, this idea is subtracted, in turn, from an evolution and from time, to found an ideal concept of man.

In the aesthetics of Baudelaire, modernité as an expression of a time, a reflection of that which is most intense and most true, is not limited to a characterization by the modern world because, for him, "il y a eu une modernité pour chaque peintre ancien; la plupart des beaux portraits qui nous restent des temps antérieurs sont revêtus des costumes de leur époque. Ils sont parfaitement harmonieux, parce que le costume, la coiffure et même le geste, le regard et le sourire (chaque époque a son port, son regard et son sourire) forment un tout d'une complète vitalité. Cet élément transitoire, fugitif, dont les métamorphoses sont si fréquentes, vous n'avez pas le droit de le mépriser ou de vous en passer. En le supprimant, vous tombez forcément dans le vide d'une beauté abstraite et indéfinissable". (Baudelaire, 2005: 355) Modernité does not only characterize modern times, it belongs to all historical periods. It is a constitution of life itself but becomes visible when an artist extracts "cet élément transitoire, fugitif" of which Baudelaire speaks. In its representation, modernité is multiple and infinite because it is subjective and changeable. There is also distancing of history because the real place of modernité is in life and, in this sense, the world provides him only its historicity, its form at a given time. However, as Baudelaire specifies, "pour que toute modernité soit digne de devenir antiquité, il faut que la beauté mystérieuse que la vie humaine y met involontairement en ait été extraite". (Baudelaire, 2005: 355) In this passage, modernité finds again its two components, the eternal and the transient, art or the ideal, and life, to become antiquity. Far from an academic sense of the word, Baudelaire conceives it as classic, i.e. as worthy of being a reference for other artists. So it is when modernité becomes an inseparable whole, canceling the traditional

duality between ideal and real, it accesses universality. Baudelaire's aesthetic is not based only on the expression of that which is transient and fugitive in the modern world, because this would ignore the corollary that creates the basis of his concept of modernité. One does not exist without the other. In fact, when the artist is able to capture the external life of the world in which he lives, he still must abstract and reveal an inner and profound life that the truth of this hierophany allows the passage of an expression of historicity to that of a transhistoricity. In this case, present is still present.

However, we must remember that, for Baudelaire, this particular relation to the modern world is based on a "mnemonic art", i.e. an aesthetic experience that takes place only in the memory of the present, and for which the work of painter Constantin Guys activity offered a perfect example. However, this distancing of the present world, and not the present time, is coupled with a sense of urgency, as if the transcript of the richness and intensity of a moment, which contains within it all the world, demands the entire investment of the artist in the creation. Here, modernité is described as a fleeting presence, a "ghost", requiring the artist to perceive and extract. This presence is immanent, it now belongs to the artist as a memory, a fleeting memory of course, but it is that which creates value and, for that, it represents a vital picture of the present. This detail is important as it indicates that the relationship to modernité is subjective but that it is never given immediately to our perception, it requires a distancing from which the artist can bring out the decisive external character of it and, may be, its inner greatness. The artist's relationship with modernité is then made in recognition of the same, which offers the possibility of a correspondence between interiority and the contingent world in both its presence and permanence.

So we must consider the concept of modernité as an aesthetic of the present, it asks that the artist have a special relationship with time and with the life, far more than that which we call reality, the actual, or real life. Modernité is a consciousness of a time, which is revealed in its absolute actuality. Perceived in this way, modernité is discernible in the world but also in other works. Modernity is therefore transgressive in that it has nothing to do with the categories of knowledge that allow man to comprehend a method of expression (literature, painting...) because its place of action is life itself.

Few people will understand the real scope of the text and the meaning Baudelaire gives to modernité substantive. However, it must be said, this misunderstanding is still relevant.

A distancing from the original concept

Baudelaire will have a significant influence on a whole generation of poets, critics and artists that will deem him the troubadour of modern life or one of its heroes. It is therefore not surprising that we find him as one of the extras representing the "active forces" of society in *L'Atelier du peintre* of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) or in *Hommage à Delacroix* of Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904). However, if many personalities from the literary and artistic world identify themselves with the poet's work, they make their own interpretations or they take from it, which can support their own aesthetic concepts. Indeed, very quickly, the concept of modernité will not have the meaning given by Baudelaire.

One example of misunderstanding of this foundational text can be found a few years after its release. Indeed, in 1868, the Brussels art dealer and critic Arthur Stevens, brother of the painters Joseph and Alfred Stevens, wrote a text entitled *De la modernité dans l'art*, to answer Jean Rousseau, a Brussels colleague, about his ignorance of the true meaning of modernité. On the occasion of the Ghent Salon, in his article of the 7th of September 1868, for *L'Écho du Parlement*, a large Brussels daily, Jean Rousseau writes that "la modernité n'est autre chose que la peinture de modes". (Stevens, 1868: 7) This statement is summarized in the same

article by a formula more synthetic: “Modernité: modes! Peintre de la modernité: modiste!” (Stevens, 1868: 8) Under the pen of Jean Rousseau, modernité comes down to be the expression of the fashion of the time. Moreover, by becoming a simple “modiste”, i.e. whoever follows fashion, the painter dedicates himself to the commercial fever of the moment and, in this way, he gives to his paintings a material and mercenary dimension. Thus the recurring debate of the nineteenth century between the spiritual and the material emerges again behind this opposition.

Faced with this lack of understanding of what modernité is, Arthur Stevens appealed to the authority of the inventor of the word, that is to say to Charles Baudelaire, from whom he quotes numerous passages taken from the *Peintre de la vie moderne*, which he presents in several pages one after the other without any comment. After this peremptory recourse to the text of Baudelaire and to defend the concept, Alfred Stevens reminds Jean Rousseau that it is the French painters and, in particular, those belonging to the romantic generation who “ont dénaturé le but de la peinture, et l’ont poussé à la décadence, en la faisant retrospective”. (Stevens, 1868: 15) Developing a painting of anecdotal history, following the example of Paul Delaroche, painters have only perpetuated a well-worn tradition of tirelessly repeating the past, offering the viewer only scenes set in the past. In fact, the painting has become separate from man and the contemporary world. However, for Arthur Stevens, “l’Art tout entier est dans la représentation de la vie contemporaine, [et] les vrais peintres d’histoire sont ceux qui peignent leur temps”. (Stevens, 1868: 9) The critic uses a common place to demonstrate and justify the representation of contemporary life at the heart of painting: the true painters of historical tableaux, like those of the Renaissance, constantly contextualized their subjects in their time. In this way, the use of contemporary dress and representation of contemporary scenes belong to the painting tradition. It is therefore not possible to reject that, especially for Arthur Stevens, “ils expriment une vision et une émotion directes, de première main, pour ainsi dire”. (Stevens, 1868: 9) Taking their motif in their time, artists can capture life, gesture, emotion, which inevitably gives a ring of truth to their works. Furthermore, for the critic, “l’Art participe aux transformations sociales.” (Stevens, 1868: 21) Art is a witness to its time, but it is also an actor, while dependant on its era. To illustrate his words, Alfred Stevens takes for example sacred painting. Indeed, for him the reason for the disappearance of this style of painting is that the modern age has lost faith and, unlike previous periods, there are no more acquirers for this type of work. Similarly, the abandonment of the large format in favor of easel paintings is also the expression of changes in attitudes and customs of the artist’s contemporaries. In so doing, painting is the expression of trends of the time. However, as stated the critic Alfred Stevens, painting also participates in it. Art is not neutral, it is not limited to giving a simple illustration of the time: it has an active role in it. The use of the terms “transformations sociales” can’t be innocent and requires a connection between Arthur Stevens’ discourse on modernité and the pictorial movement of realism. In the logic of the critic, the painter of modernité is a realist since he is painting the history of his time, he is the chronicler of it. But above all, he is reflecting that which is before his eyes without trying to idealize it. In this way, he is a realist. Moreover, we must not forget that the brothers of Arthur Stevens, Alfred and Joseph, have embraced the realist movement early in their career by giving it a social perspective². The connection between realism and modernité is made possible by the idea that both are committed to representing contemporary life but must also take into account the proximity that Stevens have with this pictorial movement.

However, this implicit reference to realism doubles as a stance in favor of the question of ornament in genre painting. For Arthur Stevens, the trinket “caractérise les mœurs, les goûts, les habitudes de nos contemporaines” (Stevens, 1868: 22) The object becomes a revealing sign of the man or woman who possesses it while also serving as hallmark of the times. In the genre of contemporary painting, the accessory has an important place: screens, fans, umbrellas, carpets, furniture and vases show the eclecticism of the period and also claim social belonging of the sitter of the painting. Alfred Stevens made a specialty of this genre. Indeed, he painted women under the reign of Napoleon III with their jewels, their clothes, their trinkets. In this way, he is a painter of modern life. Moreover, in his text, Jean Rousseau cites Alfred Stevens as such. Therefore we

must consider this element in the reading of this text because, in doing so, it takes on a new meaning. In fact, the text should have been published in the columns of *L'Écho du Parlement*, in response to the article by Jean Rousseau, but faced with the newspaper's refusal, the critic was quick to publish it in a booklet. The stakes are high because, in defending modernité, in responding to attacks from Jean Rousseau about the representation of modern women and trinkets, he is defending his brother Alfred's painting. The approach of Arthur Stevens' concept of modernité is partisan but, nevertheless, it gives a certain perception of modernité, at least the one in question here. Indeed, the fact that Jean Rousseau circumscribes painting of modernité to the woman and fashion reveals a common opinion of that time: the representation of contemporary life must use references acceptable to those to whom it is intended.

During this period, the rapport with the present should not confront the viewer with a brutal reality, i.e. a subject involving an ideological, political or social dimension. Usually, the viewer takes pleasure in conventional scenes, representing most often a woman in her bourgeois interior or answering to decorative expectations of the time. The work respects the traditional social order and propriety of painting. In this context, the representation of modern life is acceptable and modernité can be reduced to the futile expression of the whims of the modern world. However, in response of Arthur Stevens, the implicit reference to the realist painting shows that modernité is not only a superficial surface, it is not limited to illustrating the present day because it brings with it a discourse, even an engagement. Whether it is ideological, political, social or aesthetic, this discourse reveals the order of the world not as it is to be imagined but as it is to be seen. In the socio-cultural and worldly space of the Salon, a painting of modernité thus causes a disturbance in the discourse of the dominant ideology because it becomes a surface for projecting the ideological values that are not yet accepted in the political and social context which gave birth to it. The critical attitude is then revealing latent concerns about phenomena that invade the painting, like fashion, and whose meaning requires an awareness of a real historical and social situation. In a dogmatic space, anchored in the perpetuation of style and the ideal, these phenomena introduce a chaotic movement that seems to pervert a space dedicated to the repetition of the same. The concept of modernité escapes its original definition and is recontextualized constantly by a confrontation with the representation of the real world. This contextualization particularized modernité by limiting it, for example, to fashion, to women, or by connecting it to an artistic movement, such as realism. The aesthetic or ideological connotations that are incorporated in it are doubled by an emotional charge that originated in the view that the observer has on society or what he believes painting should be. In this way, this particularized modernité blends with conceptions developed in the heart of aesthetic debates of this time to draw and impose on the eyes of the public new values that pass, usually, as subversive. Baudelaire's concept then loses its spiritual component to make way for the imaginary that constantly feeds aesthetic debates of his time and that will determine his image, that of the mythology of modernité. In this tangle of images and ideas, often misunderstood, modernité loses its ability to reconcile opposites and, at the same time, it is reduced to the transient, the casual, to the capturing of the historicity of the world that the painting now wants to transcribe and new pictorial movements will soon claim as a trophy.

The origins of a mythology

The connection that a Jean Rousseau or an Arthur Stevens may have with modernité is quite understandable because it is conditioned by the artistic and aesthetic concepts developed throughout the nineteenth century by critics responsible for explaining works exhibited at the Salon. In fact, with the emergence of new pictorial representations and practices, the critique of art criticism will involve an attempt to evaluate a work, perceived as new or modern, according to a set of criteria most often inherited from the past. These are the criteria that will take the place of the concept of modernité in the imaginary as conceived by critics and audiences, and

overshadow it definitely to give it a new meaning, what I call the mythology of modernité. It is to this which, henceforth, the majority of art historians will refer in their writings. But how is it constructed?

For much of the nineteenth century, one of the most essential conventions of painting is the sacred hierarchy of genres. Indeed, far from our current visual culture, we must understand that the hierarchy of genres conditions the point of view that a viewer could have of a work. In this way, numerous conventions are attached to different categories of genre and ask, among others, an appropriateness between the subject and the technique used to represent it. The hierarchy of genres is determined between two extremes: the Great Painting and the Genre Painting. From the top of the hierarchy to its base, a gradation of pictorial categories develops from the most noble subject to the less noble: The Great Painting (allegorical compositions, history painting and portraiture) and Genre Painting (genre painting, animal painting, landscape painting and still life). The internal movement of this hierarchy goes from animate to inanimate and places at the top the perfection of Creation, of Man and thus the representations of him and his actions, ending with the representation of nature, of the inanimate world. This movement is also accompanied by a significant change in the format of painting depending on the genre used, ranging from the monumental format of history painting to the small format of still life. Similarly, implicitly, the hierarchy of genres doubles as a social hierarchy. Indeed, in the hierarchy of genres, the human figure represents the pinnacle of creation but, at the same time, it is categorized according to the character represented. At the top of the scale are placed the characters belonging to the sacred sphere, to history and often those from the upper classes of society, while at the bottom of the scale are placed the workers, the peasants and the poor. This perception of the human figure repeats the vertical axis of the spiritual and the material.

However, the material appearance of a painting also depends on its place in the hierarchy of genres. Thus a painting that depicts an historical event, in which the human figure has a central role, will demand a more careful and meticulous execution than a genre painting with landscape and animals. In fact, beyond an idealized vision and conventional proportions based on classical art, the respect for the human figure can only be achieved through a sharp and distinct pictorial rendering and in which the brush strokes mask any trace of effort, in which the artist disappears behind the technique giving the impression that the painting is closer to nature. Thus, the method used must match the motif that the artist seeks to represent. In the case of a human figure, the smoothness of the paint layer must reflect the softness of skin. The texture of that which is being depicted must therefore depend on its referent. In the same logic, in landscape painting a painter uses a thin paint for the sky and thicker for the earth, this last texture being considered as possible and acceptable for this motif. To these conventions of textures is also added the pictorial convention of optical perspective, which demands that objects in the foreground are rendered so that they are clear and distinct while in objects in distance become more blurred and therefore rendered with in a more relaxed manner. In this way, the mimetic illusion of a painting guarantees a clearly legible narrative that must be manifest in the pictorial representation. However, the reversal of conventions that depends on the referent causes uncertainty for the observer viewing the represented object, and creates a sense of instability about the distribution of the various elements of the composition.

More often, we must remember how a critic or observer views a work. The viewer first regards a work overall before approaching to appreciate it in detail. It is at this moment that the finish is important for the viewer because it allows him to fully assess the verisimilitude of the motifs. It is imperative that there be no visible touch of the artist to impede the view of the work, because the viewer would lose sight of the subject and see only the expressive means that have shaped it. In this close perception of a painting, the differential between the image of the represented object and its pictorial rendering denies the mimetic illusion of painting by confronting the viewer with the presence of the material and thus to the artisanal part of the work. In the eye of the viewer, the visibility of pictorial process erases the narrative character of the work to impose only its material aspects. This disruption of the reading of the subject automatically reflects on considerations of the quality of the painting

itself. In fact, for much of art criticism, pictorial mastery is definitely on the side of the finished work, of a well executed piece, whereas if any part of the work is indeterminate it will be regarded as a technical failure on the part of the artist. Nevertheless, we must also remember that the attention to the visibility of the artist's touch is proportional to the genre to which it applies. The question of format is also essential because it corresponds to the category of genre and, in this sense that which may be acceptable in a minor genre may not be in a superior genre. In the ensemble of genres, these considerations are therefore underlying the perception of a work of art for much of the nineteenth century.

From the end of the Restoration, with the emergence of romantic painting, criticism is confronted with works that do not comply strictly with the criteria of a "beautiful" painting, according to the Academy but also to much of the public, whether the criteria is that of connoisseurs or of amateurs. Faced with differences vis-a-vis conventional painting, criticism must take a position. From this point on, the confrontation between the work and the viewer gives rise to a tension between his idea of painting and its reality. Thus the attention of art criticism will no longer focus only the subject of the work, but also on the visible processes of its creation, this is to say the activation of the expressive potential of the pictorial material by the artists. Faced with a tradition where the hand of the artist must cede to the subject, the liberty taken by certain artists shocked not only the critics but also the public. One immediately recalls Eugene Delacroix, but the long list of other important artists must include Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps and landscapers, e.g. Paul Huet or Diaz de la Peña, are important.

Throughout the July Monarchy, following the example of these artists, other painters will also explore the expressive potential of the pictorial matter so they may be considered true artists, as is the case with Théodore Chassériau, or they will simply copy a particular technique of a renowned artist, rendering themselves as only imitators. In either case, criticism raises the question of the artist's originality through the personal imprint that he leaves in his work, through specific activation of processes which will distinguish it from another painter. It is therefore above all a formal originality, a material expression of an artist that is characteristic of him. In fact, originality becomes a criteria for gaining visibility at the Salon, a way to get noticed by the public and the critics. Unlike a traditional approach to painting, originality is no longer in the invention and thought that has as its goal the representation of a subject, but in the sensitive character of its expression. From the romantic era, and for the rest of the century, for many critics the excessive character of a pictorial way is dominated by a new generation of painters that intensifies the visibility of pictorial manner is dominated by a new generation of painters that intensifies the visibility of pictorial processes in reaction to the old school. From this moment, the activation of "outrageous" of the expressive potential of the pictorial matter is seen as a strategy to stand out, to get noticed at the Salon. In fact, it is necessary for an artist to speak of himself, for better or worse, in order to exist in the artistic scene of that time. In this context, the role of artistic criticism and the development of the press have a key role.

Throughout the nineteenth century scandal and the excess are key elements in a strategy to allow an artist to emerge from anonymity, to stand out from the crowd of artists in the eyes of critics or buyers. The most representative example of such transgressions is of course that of *Un enterrement à Ornans*³, by Gustave Courbet. However, the idea of deliberately breaking the rules of conventional painting to generate visibility at the show is not new. One who employed this practice during the July Monarchy is the painter Charles-Louis Müller (1815-1892), who exhibited at the Salon of 1841 *Promenade d'Héliogabale dans Rome*⁴, a flashy, erotic subject drawn from antiquity while showing an ostentatious originality. He will repeat it at the Salon of 1843 with a subject drawn from ancient mythology and, in 1844, with a religious subject, *L'Entrée de Jésus-Christ à Jérusalem*⁵. With each submission, the artist focuses the outraged critic's attention on "son libertinage de dessin et de couleur" (*L'Artiste*, 1844: 210) and his "mépris de toute vérité historique, de toute convenance locale et morale" (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1844: 356). After these brilliant feats, the painter has achieved his goal, which is to be noticed and discussed, he must return to the ranks and work to remain there.

The unfailing presence of words such as "originality", "beauty", "execution", among others, in the aesthetic debates of that time will define the horizon and, inevitably, the space in which critical discourse can confront itself with the immediate presence of a given work. Whether hostile or favorable to new painting, criticism draws from a common foundation to express sentiments about a work. Therefore, in the case of a favorable criticism, the taking into account of the distinctive and particular characteristics of a work obliges the viewer to find a space of conciliation where he is able to force an alignment between the reality of the work and his personal sensitivity and cultural background. However, much of the discourse of criticism is based on the salient aspects of the new style of painting, which is also the controversial aspects of it. Indeed, the tension between the ideal and the real, between transcendence and immanence, between spiritualism and materialism, continuously fosters the forces that play in opposition to each other that critics discerned in painting from this time.

Two worlds, two visions of painting inexorably impose their differences when faced with a regenerated *plein-air* painting which is developed outside academic presuppositions because, between originality and conformity, there is no middle ground, and this in spite of the existence of a conciliatory painting. The tension born of these two extremes could only create a radicalization of these approaches on the part of one or the other. In general, however, the first half of the nineteenth century provided the necessary elements for the development of the idea of modernité in the second half of the nineteenth century. It prepared the ground for artists, but also for critics, who will be the actors or witnesses to this adventure in painting, and who will try to understand the art of their time. But, in spite of themselves, critics have woven a multiplicity of discourses of varying intensity, but ones that are irremediably imposing a vehement imaginary to the pictorial reality of this century. Both persuasive and authoritative, the imaginary now conditions our view of modern painting and, simultaneously, that of modernité. Thus the mythology of modernité feeds upon a discourse that unfolds from the theoretical contours of the time while seeking to understand the outpouring of liberty, with a creative movement that has no common measure with previous centuries, which is apparent both in the pictorial material as well as the choice of the subject and in the personality of the artist. Ultimately, it is the focal point of an aesthetic discourse that is characterized by a process of continuous and plurivocal redefinition, but one whose clearly defined demarcations impose themselves irremediably as normative.

Mythology(s) and modernité(s)

The tension born of the interplay of opposites that critics discerned in the painting of his time will increase during the second half of the nineteenth century. The discourse against a painting that does not comply with the "correct" conventions will also harden during the Second Republic and even more with the Second Empire. It must be said that, for a contemporary viewer visiting the Salon, painting will not assert itself by its unity but by its chaotic appearance given the number of works and the diversity of styles prevents that prevent the viewer from discerning a regenerative movement at the heart of the French school. This movement is nevertheless hoped for by the proponents of the academic tradition that attempt to preserve an elitist idea of art and the artist, in which painting retains the spiritual part of its practice while remaining independent vis-a-vis the material preoccupations of the world. However, the reality is quite different: painters begin to produce more quickly preferring easel painting and thus allowing their work to be exhibited outside the Salon.

The choice of many painters to devote their art almost exclusively to easel painting is not innocent because, with it, they can choose subjects that match painting trends, without having to follow a traditional formula, which can be considered constraining, as in the Great Painting. By its format and the topics it allows to develop, easel painting corresponds to the Genre Painting. Thus easel painting is the freest genre of painting but it also corresponds to the format which suits private interiors, especially that of the bourgeoisie, there is therefore, for

painters, a way to sell more easily than if they were practicing the Great Painting. The economic dimension now attached to easel painting and the idea of a painting done quickly to meet market demand leads to much criticism because it is seen as a lowering of painting to the common taste and to show many paintings as simple manufactured products. An idea of painting as decadent therefore asserts itself on much of the criticism given.

The exponential growth in the number of works sent to the Salon is explained by the fact that the increase of vocations to an artistic career has continued to increase during the July Monarchy. To this phenomenon, we must add the emergence of the bohemian, the marginalization of young artists wishing to escape the dictates of a society which they no longer recognize as their own, but mostly because of a condition of poverty, most often suffered, sometimes desired, caused by reduced opportunities to distinguish themselves as individuals in the art world precisely because of the growing number of its contenders. To have visibility, an artist must now put in place a strategy to be noticed by the public, whether it is the connoisseurs or the *bourgeois* who are being critiqued. In fact, the opposition to the renowned and established artists will be more virulent and more direct during the Second Empire. This radicalization will increase even after the defeat of Sedan in 1870 and after the suppression of the Commune in 1871, terrible events that only add their share of resentment and bitterness to a general atmosphere already burdened. It's throughout the Third Republic that radicalism, both aesthetic and poetic, will assert itself permanently as one of the critical strategies of an artistic practice that claims itself as *avant-garde* and *pass*, now, as the ultimate expression of *modernité*.

One of the milestones towards this radicalization can be found in the group paintings by Henri Fantin-Latour in the last years of the Second Empire. Indeed, *Hommage à Delacroix*⁶ and *Un atelier aux Batignolles*⁷ clearly show a new attitude of the artist against the tradition in which he is inserted. In the first painting, artists gather around the figure of Eugene Delacroix, who died the previous year and is now present in a portrait hanging on the wall, and in the second around Édouard Manet, represented in the process of painting a portrait of the critic Zacharie Astruc. Among the famous artists represented in this painting, we must mention Auguste Renoir, Emile Zola, Frédéric Bazille and Claude Monet. While critics see in the first painting a kind of advertising where the artists will show themselves in the company of Delacroix, the great painter of Romanticism, the second will be seen as the manifesto of a young generation of artists coming together around the painter of the Salon des Refusés. However, both show a new stage in the conception of the painting, namely an autonomy of its production and the discourse that accompanies it. When Fantin-Latour exhibits *Hommage à Delacroix* in the Salon of 1864, and *Un atelier aux Batignolles* in 1870, he clearly states in these two paintings where his pictorial preferences are headed and what his affinities are with the contemporary art world. Following the example of Fantin-Latour, other artists will also create their manifesto paintings, such as *Hommage à Cézanne*⁸ by Maurice Denis or *Hommage à Gauguin*⁹ by Pierre Girieud, to name a few. Now, the painting chooses its origin, and, in so doing, creates its own past. There is no longer the idea of a temporal continuity going back to the great masters of painting, but a fragmented story, born from a position that causes a break in the chain of pictorial tradition. The new generation opposes the previous one and, at the same time, it denies the value it has given, while the dominant ideology refuses the proposals of the new generation, as will be the case with the conventional painting and Impressionism but also with this movement and his appointed successor, neo-impressionism. The painting no longer belongs to the past but founds itself in the present, constantly beginning again, the work of the artist. *Modernité*, advancing under the mask of mythology, then gives way to *modernités*.

Fragmented successive stories, indeed simultaneous and interlocked, *modernités* assert themselves as the exaltation of their own existence in their absolute individuality that distinguishes them from the practice of their contemporaries. A doctrine established itself against another because only an unshakeable certainty can resist an orthodoxy thought. So in a bid to claim a new aesthetic, *modernités* confront the public and the critics in a construction where the signs of individual expression unfold and identify the artist. This new accentuation of expressive techniques and materials inevitably provokes a reaction that is transcribed in the critical discourse.

Therefore, the aesthetic theories, which were formulated with the bias of the new painting during the first half of the nineteenth century while attempting to preserve some sense of tradition, come to explain a painting that does not correspond to the idea they have of it. There is no longer any question of a reconciliation between the spiritual and material from painting or the contemporary world. Definitely, modernité gives way to its mythology to fragment itself into a multitude of entities that are exclusive to each other, each wanting to be the starting point for a renewal of art.

In a text about the writer Paul Bourget written in 1882, Jules Laforgue (1860-1887) gives an overview of aesthetic creation of his time: “Il y a bien eu le coup de folie de la *modernité*, mais on s’est vite aperçu que la *modernité* du mois dernier était tout autre que celle de ce mois-ci, laquelle, de son côté, ne sera pas la *modernité* du mois prochain. Puis quoi, la *modernité*, c’est la Création moderne, c’est l’âme moderne, et cette âme est tout. *Bonjour Monsieur!*” (Laforgue, 2000: 131-132) Not without irony, as the final apostrophe to the reader gives proof, Jules Laforgue presents modernité (he places it in italics in the text) as the dynamics of an incessant contemporary creation definitively supplanting the previous one. This observation of a creation always moving forward without looking back is nevertheless already tinged with a certain disenchantment which found its climax in the novel *le Soleil des morts* by Camille Mauclair (1872-1945). The novel presents a group of *fin-de-siècle* artists ignored or rejected by their contemporaries, and whose traits are imprinted on the artistic personalities of the era, like the poet Calixte Armal, avowed replica of Mallarmé, or the painter Niels Elstiern, seen as a condensation of the painters Munch, Whistler and Manet. In one of the passages of this novel, the poet Calixte Armal responds to the narrator who tells him that he can’t follow his aesthetic quest: “Certes; Je m’en vais, moi, André de Neuze, je m’en vais avec mes songes, avec mon art qu’on ne comprend plus, avec le témoignage désavoué de mes traditions. Et vous, et vous, hélas ! vous rentrez dans l’époque au moment où elle s’en va vers le néant, où elle va se détruire elle-même [...] vous n’entrerez pas en terre promise! La modernité est finie, mon pauvre enfant! Ne me disiez-vous pas que vous n’aviez pas de foi nouvelle?” (Mauclair, 1898: 237) This statement sounds like the death knell of an adventure, of this aesthetic radicalism that was sufficient in itself, cut off from the world's concerns. Yet the modernités do not stop there, they regain a renewed visibility at the beginning of the twentieth century with an intensity and vehemence previously unknown.

In conclusion

Except under Baudelaire’s pen, modernity is never manifested in the form of an aesthetic concept but in the form of its mythology. Therefore, this slight of hand has imposed on the imaginary a rhetoric of a criticism incessantly confronted with the polemical aspects caused by the emergence of a new pictorial approach which does not coincide with the idea of what painting should be. Even it is undeniable that the expressive potential of the pictorial material or that of work executed *d’après-nature*, or that the representation of the modern world participates in the adventure of modern painting, it is not possible to reduce modernité to these elements. Similarly, presenting as evidence the scandals as provocative events causing a rupture in the timeline of art history and, at the same time, the affirmation of modernité, would not address the practices of the time, at least until the end of the Second Empire. Scandal, transgression, and rupture as founding myths of modern painting and modernité simply provide the facility to categorize - if not compartmentalize - artists and their works within a discourse of art history that wishes to be rational (Massonnaud, 2003: 287). Far from the diversity and richness of the aesthetic of this era, the discourse of rupture and transgression focuses on some prominent individuals and reduces the aesthetic debate to the acquisition of exclusive aesthetic positions, as will be the case with avant-garde during the Third Republic, and even more so thereafter.

However, in view of the writings of Charles Baudelaire, the concept has a real consistency and makes sense. Modernité, as understood by him, allows reconcile the spiritual and the material. The concept is thus an attempt to respond to this conflict that saturates the thought of the nineteenth century. From the individual, it is elevated to the universal and it takes on this aesthetic and ontological dimension which allows to inhabit and live the present intensely, if only for a moment. Modernité is outpouring. It is that by which a link is created between the subject-viewer and the object of his attention in the intensity of an absolute actuality. For him who knows how to view it, this present surpasses all forms of dualism but also the categories of knowledge because its domain is that of life itself.

However, from a space of conciliation modernité will become one of controversy. Society considers itself and would like to be modern but it cannot accept any realistic representation of itself. Faced with a painting attempting to describe the world in which it has evolved, its representation and modernité will become commingled; the temptation being too great to not associate modernité with a reductive definition of realism, i.e. a representation of the world as it appears to our eyes. The particularization of modernité then leads to confusion about what it is and inevitably leads to rejection and conflict. In this way, the idea of rupture as the foundation of modernité reveals the fact that it holds more to its mythology than to its original concept. The imperative of modernity is no longer that of shocking the present in its absolute actuality but one of choice of an irreconcilable difference with the past, with tradition, and is designated as such. It may seem surprising to state that, while turning their backs on Baudelaire's definition of modernity and taking only its mythological formulation, commentators have built once more and in a redundant manner a discourse of opposition and have made of the term modernité the catchword of a strict opposition to the past, to tradition. In this case, modernité becomes the pretext to take a position towards the world and to speculate on the meaning of history. Yet, we must consider modernity as an aesthetic concept in itself, at the same level as the beautiful and the sublime, and, in this case, a study of modernité as an aesthetic and ontological phenomenon remains to be written.

Bibliography

BAUDELAIRE, Charles. *Critique d'art*. Paris: Gallimard, Folio essais, 2005.

LAFORGUE, Jules. *Œuvres complètes*. L'Age d'Homme, 3 Vol., 1986-2000.

LONGBOIS-CANIL, Christophe. *De moderne à modernité, les généalogies d'un concept*. Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 2015.

MASSONNAUD, Dominique. *Courbet scandale – Mythes de la rupture et Modernité*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003.

MAUCLAIR, Camille. *Le Soleil des morts*. Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1898.

RICHET, Denis. *La France moderne: L'esprit des institutions*, Paris: Flammarion, 1973.

QUINCY, Quatremère de. *Essai sur la nature, le but et les moyens de l'imitation dans les beaux-arts*. Treuttel et Würtz, Paris, 1823.

QUINCY, Quatremère de. *Essai sur l'idéal dans ses applications pratiques aux œuvres de l'imitation propre des arts du dessin*. Adrien Le Clere et Cie, Paris, 1837.

STEVENS, Arthur. *De la modernité dans l'art – lettre à M. Jean Rousseau*, Bruxelles: Rozet et fils, 1868.

Revue

L'Artiste, série 3, tome V, 14e livraison, 1844.

Revue des deux mondes, nouvelle série, tome VI, 15 avril 1844.

Web

BAUDRILLARD, Jean, Article "Modernité", *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 2005, Disponible en: <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/modernite/>

Notas

¹ Doctor of Aesthetics of the University of Paris 8 (France), graduate of Art History (University Roma III, Italy), teaches aesthetics and art history, contributed to the art magazine *Art Absolument*. His current research focuses on the art criticism, the painting and exhibitions in Paris during the nineteenth century. Email: clongboiscanil@yahoo.fr.

¹ I use the term modernité and not modernity because its use and its history are different in the Anglo-Saxon world.

² As such, it is possible to cite *Bruxelles le matin* of Joseph Stevens (oil on canvas from 1848 exhibited in Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium) and *Ce qu'on appelle le vagabondage* of Alfred Stevens, exhibited at the Universal Exhibition of 1855 (oil on canvas exhibited in Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

³ *Un enterrement à Omans*, 1850, oil on canvas, 313 x 664 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay.

⁴ Unlocated.

⁵ Unlocated.

⁶ *Hommage à Delacroix*, 1864, oil on canvas, 160 x 250 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay.

⁷ *Un atelier aux Batignolles*, 1870, oil on canvas, 204 x 273,5 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay.

⁸ *Hommage à Cézanne*, 1900, oil on canvas, 180 x 240 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay.

⁹ *Hommage à Gauguin*, 1906, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, Pont-Aven, musée de Pont-Aven.

Artigo recebido em setembro de 2016. Aprovado em novembro de 2016.