Introduction
The modernist avant-garde and the culture of market society

In New York in 1921, Man Ray made a short film of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, then forty, shaving her pubic hair. It was shot during the short-lived period of New York Dada and it had art written all over it.[1] Exhibited exclusively to other New York *bohémiens*, mainly in the Walter and Louise Arensberg circle, it was a typical product of the hothouse culture of early modernism. The luminous starkness of the woman's care-worn, but strangely vibrant, body affronted not only conventional morality, but also the conventional aesthetic academicism of, say, Adolph-William Bouguereau's blushing, heavily fleshed but weightless, nudes. At that time, Bouguereau's gravity-defying females appealed particularly to prosperous bankers and business tycoons.

Although Man Ray's film is about a not-very-glamorous and aging woman shaving her pubic hair, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, about defining the space between avant-garde culture and ordinary society, what Andreas Huyssens calls the Great Divide between the avant-garde and mass society. In 1921, that distance was still visible. By the end of the twentieth century, it had almost entirely disappeared. Today Dada and ordinary life have more or less converged. Just look around you. Showing a woman, or a man for that matter, shaving the pubic area is probably still not possible on the afternoon TV talk shows in the year 2004,[2] but who can say with confidence that it won't already be old hat by the centenary of Man Ray's film in 2021? After all, the topic of shaving body hair has already been well and truly broached in the popular culture. Certainly it's a tedious fixture among the popular pornographers. It was common or innocuous enough in the 1990s, for example, to provide the *Seinfeld* show with the occasional opportunity for some cheap laughs. And starting with the shaved heads, chests, and pierced body parts of our recent *fin de siècle*, how long can it be before the razor's edge descends to the pubic sphere?

Early twentieth-century literary modernism developed in small coteries of like-minded artists and their hangers-on who were acutely conscious of

their difference from everyday society. Ezra Pound was the modernist who was perhaps most anxiously attentive to the artist's difference: "The serious artist is usually, or is often as far from the ægrum vulgus as is the serious scientist" (*Literary Essays*, 47). Or, in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1920):

> Beneath the sagging roof
> The stylist has taken shelter,
> Unpaid, uncelebrated,
> At last from the world's welter
> (*Collected Poems*, lines 172–75)

This distance from the vulgar mob was not a matter of choice; it was thrust upon the serious artist by a special fate. "Artists," Pound wrote, "are the antenae of the race" (*Literary Essays*, 58). He insisted again and again on the exclusiveness of both the artist's calling and the very small number of intellectually superior people who could grasp the significance of the artist's work. The occasional note of self-pity ("the sagging roof") was not typical; it was always better to take the offensive, to make the detachment of the "stylist" not only a virtue, but a source of strength.

The modernist bohemia adopted a trenchant, sometimes surly, policy of self-imposed apartheid when it came to the philistine public. Here is Pound's colleague and H.D.'s husband, Richard Aldington, in 1915:

> The conditions of modern popular art are so degrading that no man of determined or distinguished mind can possibly adopt them. "What the public wants" are the stale ideas of twenty, or fifty, or even seventy years ago, ideas which any man of talent rejects at once as banal. It is only the *cliché*, only the stale, the flat, and the profitable in art which finds ready acceptance and eager purchasers; while the exploiters at third hand of original ideas are the only innovators to secure applause . . . The arts are now divided between popular charlatans and men of talent, who, of necessity, write, think and paint only for each other, since there is no one else to understand them. ("Reflections," 37)

This was a position Pound endorsed, regularly reminding his colleagues of the difference between what is good enough for the public, and what is "good" for the artist, whose only aim ought to be the perfection of the *made* artefact (*Letters*, 98):

> As for the "eyes of a too ruthless public": damn their eyes. No art ever yet grew by looking into the eyes of the public, ruthless or otherwise. You can obliterate yourself and mirror God, Nature, or Humanity but if you try to mirror yourself in the eyes of the public, woe be unto your art. (*Letters*, 37)

He insisted that genuine connoisseurs of literature, capable of real discrimination, were limited to a few hundred at any one time, and that no poet

whose book demanded mental attention could sell more than five hundred copies in the North Atlantic world.[3] Here is the outline of the artisanal sub-culture that was later deployed to get Joyce into print and to inscribe a work's value as a function of its singularity, newness, and rarity.

But there was more to the sense of distinction than simply putting distance between the artist and the masses. There was also the desire to smash through the patina of propriety that characterized bourgeois life in the late nineteenth century. It was necessary to blast away at moribund ideas, conventions, and the strangled gentility that ended in emotional paralysis, and with the anaesthetized lyricism of Georgian poetry. The aim was a kind of creative destruction, i.e. the obliteration of a dying world and the release of creative energies from the ruins. Filippo Marinetti, the evangelical Futurist, staked out one of the more extreme positions in the field of battle:

> We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for . . .
>
> Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the musuems! (*Selected Writings*, 42)

These are the avant-gardiste polemics, then, with which modernism announced itself from about 1910 through the 1920s to an essentially indifferent Britain and America, and an openly derisive public media, and by which it drew its own boundaries tightly around itself. The combativeness compelled, in reaction, the intense face-to-face intimacies which characterized social relations within bohemia. From the soirées at the Stein salon, number 32 rue Fleurus in Paris, or the gatherings of Bloomsbury at number 50 Gordon Square in London, or the 'Ezra-versity' in Rapallo, Italy, the modernist avant-garde not only told itself the story of its own difference and superiority, but enacted it as well in the making of private communities.

This difference from the masses has been at the heart of most accounts of the cultural history of modernism. Inevitably, the phenomenon has been interpreted differently by scholars of diverging political leanings. Some literary historians, like Hugh Kenner, C. K. Stead, and Christopher Butler for example, have accepted this supposed state of affairs as the inevitable fate of artists who are by definition exceptional people. Leftist or liberal scholars, like John R. Harrison, Terry Eagleton, and John Carey, have rejected this kind of argument and analyzed modernist elitism in terms of class prejudice, as one more essentially bourgeois routine for putting distance between a threatened middle class and the Sweeney-ish proletarian masses. A more recent current of opinion sees white, male modernists as racist and sexist

exemplars of patriarchal, imperial, phallogocentric society. In these works, the exceptionalism of the modernists conflicts awkwardly with what seems to be their abject conformity to the cultural and political dominants of racist and sexist societies. If that's the case, how *do* we make sense of the appearance of the "powerful feminist story" (Dekoven, "Modernism and Gender," 176), "Indissoluble Matrimony" by Rebecca West, in *Blast*, the Vorticist periodical edited by that masculinist scoundrel, Wyndham Lewis?

Let me suggest a new path to the study of modernism. The modernists have an entirely different relationship to mass society and have played another, quite different role in the making of modern times than their admirers and detractors have supposed in the past. I don't deny that the modernists considered themselves a cultural elite. What I dispute is the historical significance of their elitism. They were neither the righteous defenders of civilized values in a destitute time, nor were they nests of political reactionaries, fascists, or misogynists in any way that counts. They played a far more important role in the evolution of the culture of capitalist society than has been acknowledged hitherto. Let me put it as baldly as I can. The modernist bohemias were the social places where an unrestrained market society first began to reveal itself in its most concrete social forms, including offering a social space in which the gender and sexual emancipation that characterizes fully developed market societies could begin. By the end of the twentieth century, the culture intrinsic to market society had spread from the avant-garde enclave to society at large, transforming, in its course, the everyday lives of the very philistine masses the early modernists haughtily kept at arm's length.

What I'm attempting is an informal anthropology of market-driven modernity that posits modernism as the culture peculiar to market society. I treat developed market society, as it is found in Europe and the United States, in the same way we might sail for the Queen Charlotte Islands in the northern Pacific to investigate the salmon-based culture of the Haida people. In trying to understand this ancient nation, we would need to investigate all aspects of their culture, namely, their material economy, centered on the profane and sacred activities of the salmon fishery, their social organization, language, literature, and religious beliefs. Take the sense of time among the Haida for example. Recall how many times you've read or heard about how the native American sense of time differs from the modern norm. But what is the modern norm? And why is it the standard against which the culture of an ancient people is to be measured? If the aboriginal sense of time is an integral aspect of their culture, why can't the same point be made about the uniquely capitalist grasp and experience of time?

My contention is that societies organized around the activities of exchange (rather than salmon), taking the market as the institutional embodiment of those activities, generate a distinctive culture, with its own ethos, from the organization of the self and its narratives, the unique potencies and organization of its science or magic, its visual arts, social structures, and, inevitably, its own unique senses of time and space, including specific ideas about the nature and value of history. Exchange encompasses both material and nonmaterial commodities, i.e. laser printers and the feeling of well-being you can purchase from a therapist. I take what literary and visual arts historians call "modernism" to be the intrinsic culture of market society. I use the term "exchange" to designate the practical activities of markets. Markets are the institutions of exchange. I also use the term "market-form" to refer to the structure and logic of markets. The more global term "capitalism" refers to the economic theory that has evolved over the last three centuries that provides market society with its underlying theoretical warrants.

My specific argument then is simple: the culture of everyday life in the early twenty-first century has been profoundly influenced by the modernist avant-garde of the early twentieth century. That the formal *arts* of the late twentieth century and beyond – literature, painting, sculpture, classical music, and so forth – owe a great deal to innovations wrought by artists early in the last century is too obvious a claim to need any further comment from me. Instead, I want to argue that the culture of everyday life in our time has come to be pervaded by the culture of the early avant-garde. And not only in terms of the popular or mass arts (as does Michael North in *Reading 1922*) but in terms of the social life of the masses as well. This dissemination is what we sometimes mean by postmodernism. The playfulness of the postmodern, the penchant everywhere for parody and pastiche, the pervasiveness of irony, the telescoping of history into simulacra of the past, like the theme park and the heritage industry, are the result of the spreading of the word of modernism without any of its original meanings and moods to weigh it down. It was in the late twentieth century, then, that *le parole* were finally and truly rendered *in libertá*,[4] not only for the creative few, but for everyone. And this is no more visible than in the greatest of the modernist arts of the twentieth century, advertising (see Weiss, *Popular Culture*, 55).

My question is straightforward. How have avant-garde art and styles of life – often socially marginal, countercultural, and highbrow – been acquired by the middle, the low, and every other kind of brow in capitalist society as the key cultural paradigms of the future? Historically, attempts

to reduce the richness of human intercourse to utilitarian or economic models have met with varieties of resistance, countercultural expressions of dissent and defiance. The so-called counterculture of the 1960s was only one, well-publicized manifestation of a general condition of metropolitan life for the last two centuries. The avant-garde, as a dissenting community of creative individuals, has been the locus of countercultural activity from the start. But the search for an authentic community beyond the reach of cost–benefit utility and within which the richness of human contact and creativity can be amply enacted presents new ambiguities and dangers. In the case of the twentieth century, this search for a vital community engendered, inadvertently, one of the more wry ironies in a deeply ironic epoch. The attempt to ground values in dissenting social forms – like the 1960s counterculture – can sometimes function ideologically to secure and legitimize the very values the counterculture has sought to oppose. This is especially true of *artistic* subcultures within market society, where mobilization of the aesthetic as a site of resistance to commercial civilization is especially vulnerable. The history of the last two centuries shows us again and again how the aesthetic as a primal source of value, no matter how radically disjunctive and oppositional it seems, can be absorbed over time by the dominant economic orthodoxy and recuperated as a sustaining pillar of the very system it was invented to oppose.

Many people in developed societies now live their personal lives within paradigms first explored by early twentieth-century avant-garde artistic bohemias. This is not just a feeling on my part or a hunch; it is sociological fact. In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Anthony Giddens very clearly sets out the new patterns of interpersonal relations, constructions of the self, and other microstructures of every day life that characterize what he calls "the late modern age." I connect Giddens's descriptions of the ordinary lives of ordinary people today to the kind of relationships one finds in the bohemian communities of artists and intellectuals early in the century. Indeed, Giddens even borrows a term – the pure relationship – from D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* as a general descriptor of personal relationships, especially in modern marriage, in our own time. Greenwich Village, Montmartre, Bloomsbury, Soho, and Chelsea were artistic *and* social laboratories from which characteristic styles of modernist culture invaded mainstream society in the course of the twentieth century. These now constitute the lived reality, the culture so to speak, of the everyday.[5] And this is so because the nihilism intrinsic to the logic of capitalist development now pervades every province of life. It was this that Walter Benjamin

was referring to when he commented in "Fourier or The Arcades" on the "amorality of the market society" (*Baudelaire*, 159).

I intend no value judgement in using the term nihilism nor in accepting Benjamin's term "amorality" as a synonym. Nihilism is not a synonym for chaos or anarchy. Let me quote Nietzsche on "nihilism." "What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devaluate themselves*" (*Will to Power*, 9). I concur with Heidegger's gloss, "nihilism is a *process*, the process of devaluation, whereby the uppermost values become valueless" (*Nietzsche*, IV 14). Nietzsche locates this devaluation of all values, even the highest, as part of the metaphysical destiny of Europe. More radically still, Nietzsche is not talking about nihilism as a point of view "put forward by somebody, nor is it an arbitrary historical 'given,' among many others, that can be historically documented" (4). Nihilism is not merely a modern idea with a history "inasmuch as it can be traced historically in its temporal course":

> Nihilism *is* history . . . Consequently, for a comprehension of the essence of nihilism there is little to be gained by recounting the history of nihilism in different centuries and depicting it in its various forms. First of all, everything must aim at recognizing nihilism as the lawfulness of history. If one wants to consider this history a "decline", reckoning it in terms of the devaluation of the highest values, then nihilism is not the cause of the decline, but its *inner* logic. (53)

As will become evident in the course of this book, I interpret Nietzsche's astonishing general insight in a rather more limited and material way. I agree entirely with Gianni Vattimo's assessment, "Nihilism is . . . the reduction of Being to exchange-value" (*End of Modernity*, 21) or, in Jacques Attali's formulation, it is "the slow degradation of use into exchange [value]" (*Noise*, 19). Certainly the fixed values of the past have been devalued or degraded, that is, emptied of their transcendental significance, but the reason for this lies in the historical fact that the mandate and mechanisms for assessing value have been uprooted, or disembedded, by the practical effects of the market. The marking of value has been repositioned within the variables that provide the capitalist market with its uniquely mobile ways of ascertaining the price of commodities. Whether we like it or not, this is one of the material conditions of freedom as we know it in modern times. To be free in this new sense means the creative destruction of the vestiges of the past that limited the possibilities and potential for unlimited change and self-development. Destruction of values is achieved either by obliteration of past practices (*noblesse oblige*, chivalry, and the like) or by their transformation into new commodified forms (education, for example,

conceived as continuous updates of the self in the remorseless pursuit of self-improvement).

I give the name market society to this new kind of social order that arises when a society is organized around the activities of economic exchange. The culture of such a society has a particular physiognomy that is not entirely unfamiliar. It is, as we all know, a society of relativist values. It is a society increasingly regulated, on the work side, as a deadening prison of measured time by the industrial form of production and, on the leisure side, as an onanistic fantasia of unsatisfied desires in consumption. It is also a society in which humanist values inherited from the Renaissance and the belief in the existential truth of the human person have gradually been abandoned. We are, in the language of contemporary management discourse, human *resources*, investments, assets, liabilities, not human beings. As one recent economist has blithely asserted, in her advice on the in-flight business channel of a major airline, the smart citizen thinks of him- or herself as Me, Inc. nowadays. So much for four hundred years of humanist dignity. Of course, a routine humanist *rhetoric* lives on in a kind of perpetual vampiric torment; the discourse cannot die, yet it no longer means very much. Increasingly unrestrained by past attachments to tradition and custom, capitalist society in the last few decades, as it has devalued and destroyed the communal past, has, as a result, come more fully to view than ever before. Capitalism has entered, it seems to me, its most pronounced period. I believe we have only now, at the beginning of a new century, begun to really understand what it means to live in capitalist society.

Much of the social world of the past, even if the economy was run, more or less, on market principles, was entangled in social forms, personal habits, and proprieties of feeling that derived from feudal and even ancient societies. Notions of gender difference, the generic basis of expression, the culture of heroism, honour, shame, ideas of tragedy, are only a few of the beliefs that have been entirely emptied of their ancient meanings through a process of devaluation, that in recent decades has taken us over the edge into the contemporary nihilism. So that now it is business firms, those bastions of bourgeois conformity and gray-flannel repression, who emblazon the *avant-gardist* line – "the only rule is that there are no rules" – across their institutional self-promotions. This has certainly happened in professional literary scholarship where post-structuralism represents the decisive incursion of the nihilist logic that marks fully capitalist societies. It is only through the erosion of past values, including literary and aesthetic ones, erosions wrought by the triumphant epistemology of the market, that make the strategies of devaluation, like post-structuralism, possible.

A hundred and fifty years ago, the relatively free social space of the bohemian enclaves was the first place where this devaluation began to occur. It was there that the real capitalist *social* order, unencumbered by the dying vestiges of traditional culture, first came into being as forms of resistance and gave rise, consequently, to the specifically modern paradox I hope to expound. In the bohemias of the avant-garde, *both* a counter-cultural "resistance to the accomplishment of nihilism" (Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 23) in capitalist society, *and*, ironically, the social order determined by capitalism made their earliest appearance. Not only do we bend our lives to patterns established over the last one hundred and fifty years by the avant-garde bohemias, we also surround ourselves with the styles, arts, and ideas first pioneered in those enclaves. For example, a condensed chronicle of the visual styles of avant-garde art from the Impressionists to contemporary art movements is available in the stream of commercials that flow into hundreds of millions of TV sets every night of the week. From abstract scenic designs, asymmetric typographies, expressionist camera angles, disjunctive montage, Dada performance takes, exploitation of the languageness of language, and a pervasive, smirking irony, the contemporary TV ad has abbreviated the scrupulous disciplines of modernist art to thirty-second video shots. Where the first Impressionists were forced to create their own spaces and exhibit their works in the *salons des refusés* of Paris, the most creative minds in advertising and the most innovative visual artists are no longer distinguishable one from the other. Indeed, today, they are one and the same. The difference between the Saatchi & Saatchi ad firm and the avant-garde artist has all but evaporated. Today both groups are highly talented, have had the same sort of education, have had not only the same teachers but seen through them in the same way, share the same parodic attitudes towards the past, and produce their work for the same group of clients, in the first instance as businessmen, in the second as art acquirers. What I'm saying is that there is no longer any aesthetic basis for differentiating the "fine art" of a John Chamberlain sculpture made out of car parts and the "commercial art" of the ravishingly choreographed Acura TV ads that aired on network TV in America in Autumn 1999. The designer of a posh department store window is no longer distinguishable from the curator who hangs a show in your local art gallery. But before you tell me that in your town these conjunctions are not visible, just wait. Like the uneven development of capitalism itself, its culture has also evolved unevenly across complex societies.

This state of affairs, of course, did not come about over night. My argument needs to be understood against the background of the extraordinary

capitalist revolution of the last two hundred years. The material and moral transformation of the life-world which this revolution has wrought has been immense. From the perspective of an older moral order, the change has been seen to be disastrous. Hannah Arendt notes "the degradation of men into commodities" when they meet in the exchange market. In this formulation, she endorses Marx's sense of the new economic man as existing in a state of "self-alienation" (*Human Condition*, 162). The effect on the ethical life of individuals was noted by Thorstein Veblen: "Freedom from scruple, from sympathy, honesty and regard for life, may, within fairly wide limits, be said to further the success of the individual in the pecuniary culture" (*Leisure Class*, 137). By 1931, John Maynard Keynes had already come to understand the new social organization of market society: "Modern capitalism is absolutely irreligious, without internal union, without much public spirit, often, though not always, a mere congeries of possessors and pursuers" (*Essays in Persuasion*, 306). More recently, social theorists and historians treat this transformation rather more neutrally as simple fact. Wolf-Dieter Narr, the German social theorist, refers to it as "an almost epochal change in motivation and behaviour" (*Reflexes*, 34).

My view is that there was nothing "almost" about it. It was, at first, a slow process of change, quickening in tempo as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. At the turn of the last century, the modernizing energies of market-driven capitalism unleashed in the 1800s had reached explosive levels of acceleration. Advances in mechanical engineering, metallurgy, the generation of electricity, hydraulics, ballistics, photochemistry, the introduction of new communication appliances, and other areas of innovation in applied science had begun to transform not only techniques of production in the macroeconomy but in the microeconomy of everyday life as well.[6] Stephen Kern estimates that Americans used the telephone 38 *billion* times in 1914 alone (*Time and Space*, 214). For Henry Adams in 1904, possession of an automobile meant the accomplishment of a new kind of historical time travel. One could speed through "a century a minute" simply by cruising the French countryside. "The centuries dropped like autumn leaves in one's road," he wrote, "and one was not fined for running over them too fast (*Education*, 470)." Adams's irony notwithstanding, the psychological and ethical conditions necessary for the commodification of history and geography by the heritage industry and the theme park seem already well established in his mind by 1904. Adams's irony, by the way, will be instantly recognized as the fairly typical reaction of the early modernists to two important themes: the recognition of the inevitable victory