

Traditions of the Modern: A Corrupt View

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At this *fin-de-siècle*, the “post” that was meant to mark off the modern, or perhaps to qualify it, has turned out to be a looking-glass of sorts, reviving engagements with the question of modernity. However, lurking in the shadows of this discourse is the “constitutive outside” that makes possible such narratives: tradition. In this article, I explore the question of modernity through the trope of tradition. I focus on three guises of the modern. The first is a rigidly dualistic narrative that has long marked off the traditional from the modern. Taking hold during the last *fin-de-siècle*, this is an unshakably teleological and Eurocentric modern that has woven its way through quite a bit of the social and political theory of the twentieth century. Second, I investigate the possibility of multiple modernities. I mean this not simply in terms of a globalized modern, diverse in its localizations, but as a modernity that is inherently and inevitably tainted. Third, consideration of such corruptions leads to a brief discussion of epistemological and ontological challenges. Drawing upon contemporary critical theory, I offer the “post” not as the end of intellectual traditions, but as a surplus present within the modern itself. It is my hope that this view of, and from, a corrupt modern will open up new allegories — beyond those of deaths and endings.

At the turn of the last century, how was the modern marked? In the pathways of pedestrians on Haussmann’s boulevards?¹ In the Classical dazzle of Burnham’s White City?² In the *mission civilatrice* of reforming North African natives through a reenactment of Haussmannized order?³ In the stirrings of nationalist movements, such as the one in Bengal that was cast ineluctably in the traditions of British liberalism?⁴ In a return to the naturalized haven of home and hearth amidst sweeping urban changes on both sides of the Atlantic?⁵

And if so, how is the end of the modern now marked? In the dramatic demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project?⁶ In the chaotic order of the Las Vegas boulevard, where the world, and its sights, are mimicked and staged? In the renewal of American cities as consumerist spectacle, where the visual blight of the poor and homeless must be brutally

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eradicated?⁷ In the waves of informal housing, those unruly clusters of shanties, that subvert even the most carefully planned utopia of Corbusian landscapes?⁸

The word “tradition” is at best polyvalent, and at worst, slippery. In this journal, for example, there has been a lively debate over its meanings and uses. I have chosen here to define and discuss tradition in relation to another keyword, “modern.” I see the two terms as locked in an unrelenting dualism founded on notions of purity and authenticity. In other words, I broach the question of tradition through the trope of the modern because each acts as the “constitutive outside” for the other — that is, each makes the other possible.⁹ If the modern thrives, then tradition is mummified and preserved. And if the modern dies, then tradition is revived on its ashes. Recently, the theme of the IASTE 2000 conference, “The End of Tradition?” necessitated discussion of just such cycles of life and death.

I focus specifically on two moments of the modern: its consolidation, and its supposed decline. The first involved establishment of a universalist modern, marked by a brutal symmetry of ideas and visions. But this was also a universalism that could only be defined through difference. Here, the modern was untainted by tradition because the traditional was marked off, secure behind a *cordon sanitaire*. In making this observation, I quite deliberately borrow a colonial phrase to signal the powers of modernization — the power to police space, to inscribe the traditional as exotic, to choose which traditions to preserve and display. This was the hard-fisted modernization that made the myth of the modern possible.

The second articulation concerns the more recently proclaimed end of the modern, which in turn has involved a revival of tradition. However, this seeming arch-rival of modernism is merely a mirror image, reversing the hierarchy of modern and traditional while keeping intact its dualistic logic. If the corpse of tradition was long preserved on the ice of high modernism, then it is now being resuscitated. But this is a birth that can only be couched through the death of the Other. It involves a negation that is as beholden to the modern as the modern itself has been wedded to the traditional.

It is with this discursive structure in mind that I present these two movements of the modern as a single dis/guise, rather than as separate historical moments. I will begin by situating the consolidation of the modern in fin-de-siècle world exhibitions and colonial design practices. I then review how the revival of “authentic” traditions today is an important marker of the contemporary condition¹⁰ — in particular, how the end of the modern is being written by critiques that celebrate, in populist ways, Third World traditions and indigenous knowledges.¹¹ But I also argue that the two moments, and their recurring tropes of purity and authenticity, are more usefully understood as being part of the same geopolitical order and discursive legitimacy.

Is there a more *disorderly* way of thinking about the relation between modern and traditional, another guise where these rigid dualisms are dismantled? I present this possibility

as one of multiple modernities. By this, I do not mean multiplicity as simply diverse localizations of the modern, the inevitable inflections of place and time that cannot be transcended by universalism. Rather, I am interested in what I see as inherent corruptions: in how traditional practices may slip past the modernist *cordon sanitaire*, and how modernity may taint the traditional and customary. I thus re-present the modern/traditional axis through instances of inauthenticity.

But how is this inauthenticity to be understood? If this is a surplus that cannot be mapped onto the dualistic grid of the traditional vs. the modern, how can it be imagined? The teleological grandeur of modernist narratives has come under much fire in recent decades. But the current fad of traditional dialects may in fact be little more than a new enactment of the same symbolic order. How, then, can we speak? How can multiple modernities be narrated?

In the third section of this article, I attempt to address this issue by interpreting the current historical moment as one that offers renewed privileges of representation. If this is an age of “postmodernity,” then I see the “post” not so much as an end, but as an interrogative possibility present within the modern itself. And if this is “the end of tradition,” then the emphasis (as in the title of the IASTE 2000 conference) should be on the interrogative mark rather than any verbal certainty. It is my hope that this view of, and from, a corrupt modern will open up new allegories — beyond those of deaths and endings.

TRADITIONAL ENEMIES

Let me start with a quintessentially modern icon: the Crystal Palace. First erected in London in 1851 to house a world exhibition, it was hailed as a feat of modern engineering. Involving thousands of small prefabricated parts, the structure combined iron lattice work with uniform sheets of glass.¹² But while the Crystal Palace was initially erected in London, a geopolitical mapping of its significance requires a more global sweep. I would particularly like to consider its impact as an emblem of modernization in two other locations: St. Petersburg and New York.

In late-nineteenth-century Russia, the Crystal Palace appeared as an accomplishment worthy of emulation. Russian intellectuals, inspired by the momentous 1861 emancipation of the serfs, had begun to envision a modern Russia, free of feudal trappings and rapidly catching up with the West and its democratic traditions. The Crystal Palace distilled such dreams.¹³ It was the affirmation of a universal modern to which Russia could aspire. This aspiration was a prescient vision, located midway between the words of Marx and the actions of Stalin. In 1867, Marx had declared: “The country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed, the image of its own future.”¹⁴ Almost a century later, Stalin would insist that the Soviet Union, while

fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries, must make good this distance in ten years. Thus was the teleology of modernization laid out.

But there was a late-nineteenth-century Russian voice that was markedly different. In the writings of Dostoevsky, the modernist utopia of Russia took on dystopic undertones. In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky called into question the promises of modernism, instead foregrounding a stomach-turning nausea that prefigured Sartre and the angst of the twentieth century.

Looking toward the West, Dostoevsky saw the norms of modernization and progress enshrined in monuments like the Crystal Palace, but he also saw little to celebrate. In the garb of the Underground Man, he wrote:

*You believe in a crystal edifice that can never be destroyed, an edifice at which one would not be able to stick one's tongue out, or to thumb one's nose, even on the sly. And I am afraid of this edifice just because it is of crystal and can never be destroyed, and because one could not stick out one's tongue at it on the sly.*¹⁵

Who is this “you” of whom Dostoevsky wrote? Perhaps the timeless subject of the universalist modern? And how is Dostoevsky’s snub of the Crystal Palace to be interpreted? As the perverse envy of a backward Russian? In his brilliant book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman has described Dostoevsky’s gesture as the ultimate marker of a “modernism of underdevelopment.” It is a modernism, Berman argued, characterized by desirous mimicry, bearing the apparent forms of the modern while lacking its processes and possibilities. It is also a modernism marked by an almost pathological envy, an “abject longing for the enemy’s love.”¹⁶ Berman’s interpretation is of some importance, because it casts the question of being modern in the universalistic idiom of Western reforms and brands the rejection of this as indelibly regressive. Herein lies a lineage that weaves its way through quite a bit of the social and political theory of the twentieth century.

I find it interesting to revisit Dostoevsky in the current, possibly unprecedented, era of globalization. It is worth remembering that the Crystal Palace was entitled the “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations.” Prince Albert introduced it to the British public as a setting where “the products of all quarters of the globe are placed at our disposal.”¹⁷ As such, it was one of many world exhibitions then in which a newly carved-up globe was displayed through the techniques of colonial power.

Dostoevsky rightfully recognized this as an attempt to generate “worldwide commerce.” One Prussian diplomat at the time described the Crystal Palace as a “midsummer’s night dream in the noonday sun.”¹⁸ But Dostoevsky, writing in a piece poignantly titled “Winter Notes on Summer Impressions,” rejected the symbolic order of world exhibitions, this “Biblical scene,” this “ultimate truth”:

*You sense that it would require a great deal of eternal spiritual fortitude and denial in order not to submit, not to yield to the impression, not to bow down to the fact, not to worship, not to accept the world that exists as one’s own ideal.*¹⁹

Today, as battles over globalization play out on city streets, in pepper-sprayed protests, in the trashing of McDonald’s, in austerity riots, this comment from Dostoevsky’s “Winter Notes” sounds eerily familiar.

But the dualistic structure of this modernist narrative lies not so much in the feud between Russia and the West — in what Berman saw as Dostoevsky’s attempt to snub what he could not have. The significant counterpart, what closes off the narrative and cinches its discursive logic, is the American response to the Crystal Palace, which I will present through the words of the poet Walt Whitman. This is the geopolitical imaginary that marks the other end of the map and seals its boundaries.

Whitman has long been hailed as a “captain” of American literature. His epic *Leaves of Grass* has held a special place of prominence in American literature (although more recently it was accorded the more dubious distinction of being the only recorded gift from Bill Clinton to Monica Lewinsky!²⁰). Whitman, while writing the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, is said to have attended the 1853 Crystal Palace Exhibition in New York on a daily basis, where it was reported that he marveled at its sights day and night, until even the guards knew him well.²¹

There are two striking ways in which Whitman’s writings on the Crystal Palace contrast sharply with those of Dostoevsky. First, Whitman reveled in the Archimedean bird’s-eye view provided by the exhibition. Where Dostoevsky’s Underground Man was rendered invisible by the splendor of the edifice, Whitman embraced the sweeping moment when “to him the other continents arrived as contributions.”²² This was the very spirit of the world exhibitions: to exhibit the world — and, even more boldly, to image the world as exhibition.

Second, Whitman not only gazed at the view, but also managed to position himself beyond and above it, as master of it. Dostoevsky saw himself on the margins of this eternal and universal order that demanded of him a bowing down, a Biblical scene. But Whitman stated boldly, as if to the exhibition itself:

*Encompass worlds but never try to encompass me
I crowd your noisiest talk by looking toward you.*²³

These are stunning words, marking the arrogant privileges of an upstart American nation. And that section of *Leaves of Grass* in which these lines appeared, aptly titled “Song of Myself,” delineated a commanding gaze, one that prefigured the cartographies of the twentieth century. Even Whitman’s ambivalences, regarding the benefits of the Crystal Palace exhibition for the laboring classes, indicated the persistent ambiguities of an American project of modernity.

I have taken the liberty of starting with the late nineteenth century because I think it contained critically important lineages

of thinking about the geopolitics of modernity. Here lay the mastery of the twentieth century — which, in its second half, was indubitably an American century. Here also lay the traces of what would later coalesce as the Third World, the very idea of underdevelopment. One exists; the other mimics. One embodies clearheaded gentlemanly progress; the other engages in the rudeness of a snub. One desires (and conquers); the other desires — but only in warped and perverse ways, even hating with ambivalence.

I have been thinking about this theme of Third World envy and mimicry a great deal recently. Much of my current research has concerned the city of Calcutta, a Third World metropolis not only historically designated as the “black hole” of urbanization, but also one that today continues to languish at the margins of global change.²⁴ Let me take the liberty of sharing an incident from the field that provides a sense of what I mean.

The annual Book Fair is a well-established tradition in Calcutta, an urban ritual played out under a hazy late-winter sun. Its dense avenues of bamboo-and-cloth stalls, barely holding up to the swirls of dust stirred by the shuffling feet of avid visitors, have always symbolized more than simply the city’s famed cultural passions. In many ways, the yearly fairs have signaled Bengal’s participation in a world arena of literary production, with stalls “representing” particular nations and their cultural traditions. Thus, at the 1997 Book Fair, an ill-proportioned copy of Louis Kahn’s National Assembly building represented Bangladesh.²⁵ And a stocky arch led to the French pavilion, where indigent local artists displayed their paintings for ridiculously low prices (FIGS. 1, 2). Was this a world exhibition of sorts? A postcolonial articulation of the legacy of colonial museums and fairs, displaying “otherness” with commercialized certitude? Wasn’t it appropriate then that a gigantic Coca-Cola bottle overshadowed the entrance to the French stalls? Indeed, such symbols seem to have supplanted the more familiar blazing red of the Communist party, in power locally for more than twenty years.



FIGURE 1. (LEFT) *Bangladesh pavilion, 1997 Calcutta Book Fair. Photo by author.*



FIGURE 2. (RIGHT) *French pavilion, 1997 Calcutta Book Fair. Photo by author.*

But the Calcutta fair was also different. If the last fin-de-siècle’s world expositions symbolized the colonial power to represent, then at the turn of this century, the clumsiness of the Calcutta Book Fair stalls perhaps only indicated its tenuous presence on the margins of a global cartography.²⁶ How is this to be interpreted? As a deliberate and snide rejection of the Crystal Palace motif, like Dostoevsky wishing to stick his tongue out, on the sly, at the edifices of the West? Or, more simply, as the failure of an aberrant modernism, the pathetic gesture of a liberalizing Communist government seeking to image itself within global capitalism?

The 1997 Calcutta Book Fair had a French theme, with a truncated cutout of the Eiffel Tower serving as the venue’s gate, and with French philosopher Jacques Derrida as guest of honor. But in this role, Derrida was as symbolic as the cardboard Eiffel Tower, his presence upstaged by a Communist regime simply eager to attract European investment.

But there was an unfortunate twist to this Bengali pere-stroika. A gas cylinder, which was being used to cook food in one of the stalls, overturned and set off a fire (FIG. 3). The sole fire truck on duty had no access to water, and other trucks did not arrive until the combustible mixture of bamboo, cloth and books had created a mushroom cloud of fire and smoke. The Book Fair burned to the ground. The European publishers who had arrived in the city ever so tentatively, retreated ever so rapidly.

The fire can perhaps be seen as just another instance of Calcutta’s crumbling infrastructure, a deathblow to a city long designated as “dying.” As such, it was just another example of a Third World metropolis unable to secure for itself the certainties of modernization. And the clumsy symbols of the ill-fated fair thus represent what Berman would designate a failed attempt to mimic the universal modern.

There is another form of mimicry with which this contrasts: this one from Las Vegas and its invocation of Parisian themes. Walking through Las Vegas’s Paris, along with the



FIGURE 3. *Eiffel Tower gate with fire in the background, 1997 Calcutta Book Fair. Photo by author.*

33 million other annual tourists who make the pilgrimage to this asphalted stretch of Nevada desert, I have thought back to that day in Calcutta: to a lone and paralyzed fire truck on a winter afternoon. If Calcutta marks a pathetic attempt to emulate, how is the Las Vegas Eiffel Tower to be interpreted (FIG. 4)? As First World postmodernism, a success in a city where fakery is at a premium?²⁷ The idea of a “real fake” might sound oxymoronic, but this seeming paradox reveals a particular geopolitical privilege.



FIGURE 4. *Eiffel Tower, Paris Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas. Photo by author.*

In a fascinating review of René Magritte’s paintings, to which I shall later return, Michel Foucault distinguished between resemblance and similitude. In this vein, Calcutta’s Eiffel Tower can be seen to bear resemblance to a “model,” “an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it.” It is a failure to copy the authentic, an indication of geopolitical hierarchies. In contrast, the Las Vegas Eiffel Tower can be seen as a simulacrum, one that repeats, but through “an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar.”²⁸ Here, both are equally authentic, both equally part of a world geography that links the Parisian world exhibition of 1889 to the global display of Las Vegas 2000.

MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

I am arguing, then, that these two moments — the consolidation of modernism through the taming of tradition, and the revival of tradition on the ashes of the modern — are both part of the same grand narrative of geopolitical order and discursive legitimacy. They both don the same dis/guise of authenticity.

But there is another guise in which these questions can be posed. I designate this as multiple modernities. The word “modernity” signals a surplus, an ambiguity, not immediately evident within more determined terms such as “modernism” and “modernization.” Likewise, the idea of multiplicity can be understood not so much as historical diversity but rather as a constantly contested hegemony, a subversion of the singular ideal of the modern. To put it another way, if the anecdotes I have recounted about Dostoevsky’s Russia and Whitman’s America, about a dying Calcutta and a vibrant Las Vegas, portray a cartographic certainty, indeed a cartographic duality, then the idea of multiple modernities disrupts this inherited atlas. Here, both the corruptions of the modern and the inauthenticities of tradition are glimpsed.

I will next investigate this guise of multiple modernities through two examples: the spatial politics of post/colonialism in the North African colonies, and the iconography of squatter settlements in Brasilia and Calcutta. The first example locates the relation between tradition and modernity at the site of high colonialism and its incredible modernist experiments. The second critically investigates the romanticized resurrection of Third World communities as utopian havens in the face of postmodern flux.

Algiers

A great deal has been written about French colonialism in Algeria, that oldest of colonies, that most protracted of bloody independence struggles. It is not my intention to rework these debates.²⁹ Rather, I want to revisit them only briefly to outline some key themes. First, it is obvious that colonialism involved an unprecedented level of modernization and modernism. Not only were cities and regions bru-

tally remade in ways that would have made Haussmann proud, but so also was put into place an entire professional apparatus of modernism. Thus, on the one hand, the future was “invented”³⁰; and on the other, this invention was made possible through the rationalization of geopolitical knowledge, an ordering of the world, if you will. This was the hierarchical structure best epitomized by world exhibitions like the Crystal Palace, and most clearly expressed in the discursive logic of Orientalism.³¹ Crucial to this rational modernism was the supervised preservation of carefully selected native traditions, manifested on the ground through the socio-spatial management of difference.

A striking example of these forces was Le Corbusier’s Plan Obus for Algiers (FIG. 5). For someone who had dedicated one of his earliest designs to a single god, Authority, and who lamented the republicanism of post-Haussmann France, it was not surprising that Le Corbusier saw colonialism as a welcome opportunity to spread modernism. His graphic representation of colonialism thus portrayed it as an axis of ideas, taking hold in Algiers, and extending further south to French black Africa.³² Of course, this is the very axis along which a different colonial exchange — of resource extraction and revenues and labor power — was taking place. This was the primitive accumulation, the bloody modernization, which would make the edifices of modernism possible.

Le Corbusier was particularly interested in Algiers. He had first visited the city in the early 1930s during the festivities marking one hundred years of French occupation. At the time he believed that Algiers was perhaps “the most beautiful [city] in the world.”³³ His Plan Obus envisioned preserving Algiers’ Casbah intact, with a highway hovering above it connecting the planned expansions of European residences

with European businesses. Quarantined behind this vertical *cordon sanitaire*, the Casbah and its traditions would endure, as would the careful balance between European and Muslim cultures that he articulated in various sketches.

The Plan Obus never came to fruition. Even the French military authorities were convinced that it could only be implemented through a “new bombardment” of the city. But it is perhaps this incompleteness that imparts unsullied perfection to Corbu’s vision, marking it as one of the most distilled spatial images of colonialism.

The Casbah of Algiers was preserved in other ways by the French, most notably through policies of associationism, or what Rabinow has called techno-cosmopolitanism.³⁴ But what is most interesting for my purposes here is that it was precisely this socio-spatial arrangement that aided the emergence of particular forms of political protest. Lamprakos, for example, has documented the ways in which the Casbah and its spatial traditions became the site of guerrilla warfare waged by the National Liberation Front.³⁵ The native Casbah, in fact, often proved impenetrable to European troops and tanks, refusing entry to its very creator.

But there is perhaps another way of mapping these impositions of the modern, and the challenges posed by tradition. The boundaries between Casbah and White Town were not simply regulated through zoning and building regulations, but equally through the contestation of social norms. In Algiers, such struggles coalesced around the veil, which came to serve as a “visible marker” of cultural difference.³⁶ The French labeled the veil misogynist, and defined their mission of civilization to include the liberation of Algerian women from it. But for the Algerian nationalist movement, the veil became a sign of moral resistance to European colonialism. Thus, in his *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, Fanon



FIGURE 5. *Le Corbusier’s Plan Obus, 1932.* Courtesy of M. Lamprakos, in N. AlSayyad, *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise* (Aldershot, Avebury, 1992).

wrote of how Algerian women, particularly in the cities, re-adopted the veil as a direct answer to French interventions.³⁷

Here then are the gendered and sexualized terms of the colonial modern: the exotic patriarchy of the Orient, recast and reworked by a nationalist movement. Here also is Le Corbusier's fascination with the seductive veil — which he saw as concealing the “penetrable mystery” of “ravishing coquettes,” turned on its head.³⁸ Corbusier feminized the Casbah, casting it in the image of a veiled woman.³⁹ But the Algerian nationalists nimbly used this very same veil to negotiate the *cordon sanitaire*. As the nationalist movement gained strength and vigor, the French responded by closing off the Casbah and monitoring all movement in and out of it. Meanwhile, Algerian nationalists contested such forms of spatial surveillance through performative strategies of gender that hinged on the creative deployment of the veil.

These positions were powerfully depicted in the film *Battle of Algiers* — Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's paean to the FLN 1954–1958 uprising in the Casbah.⁴⁰ Among other things, the film showed how Algerian women would transform themselves into European women, carrying bombs and revolvers into the heart of the European districts. Fanon wrote of such moments:

*The unveiled Algerian woman moves like a fish in the Western waters. The soldiers, the French patrols, smile to her as she passes, compliments on her looks are heard here and there, but no one suspects that her suitcases contain the automatic pistol which will presently mow down four or five members of one of the patrols.*⁴¹

And when this strategy was uncovered by the French, the veil was once again assumed, this time by nationalist men who donned the *chador*, thus claiming the feminized protections of what was perceived to be a misogynist tradition. Surely, French soldiers would never have had the courage to look underneath the disguise of the veil (FIG. 6).

And so here is a traditional symbol “manipulated” and “transformed into a technique of camouflage.”⁴² This goes to the core of what Watts has called an “Islamic modernity,” understood through the ambiguous and paradoxical making and remaking of self and space.⁴³

Also revealed here are the ambiguities of both colonialism and its postcolonial articulations. *Battle of Algiers* showed how the seeming duality of the colonial city was a binary that could not be easily policed and implemented. Instead, the very inauthenticity of tradition, in this case embodied in the strategic deployment of the veil, allowed a constant remapping of city and home, nation and world. Here, the veil lost its fixed meaning as a traditional symbol, and instead became both the claim to a modern nation-state and to a distinctively regional articulation of that modernity. In other words, as the authenticity of tradition was undermined, so was eroded the universalism of the modern.



FIGURE 6. *Battle of Algiers*; film still; publicity material.

And yet it is important at this point to sound a few cautionary notes. I do not mean to interpret strategy as subversion, or inauthenticity as liberation. The manipulations of the veil shown in *Battle of Algiers* cannot be seen as a utopian recovery of tradition, as a weapon of the weak. Instead, I see them as an indication of the ways in which the articulation of the traditional and the modern act as an axis of identity and power.

Perhaps this is most clearly evident in the gendered nuances of this narrative. It was the performative gender strategies that created a surplus of meaning, one that defied the simple mapping of modern and traditional. When the Algerian woman took off her veil, was she modern? Was she mimicking the modern? Or was this the purest moment of her traditional incarnation? It is just such an equivocation I find exciting.

But, again, equivocation cannot be interpreted as freedom. Despite the intricacies of Fanon's argument, he maintained the female body as the ultimate site of nationalist struggle.⁴⁴ Le Corbusier's vision of the Casbah was consummated through his imagining of a city as plastic and beautiful as the supple-hipped and full-breasted Algerian woman.⁴⁵ Fanon's nationalist imaginary was fueled by a fetishized and feminized Algerian authenticity. For him, the Algerian struggle was made possible through a remaking of the female body, which in turn remade urban space. But, in the last instance, the revolutionary act of unveiling was to him the sexualized act of walking into an European city “stark naked.”⁴⁶ The contradictions of the Algerian veil, and the discourses thereof, can indeed be read as a forebearer of contemporary forms of anguish.

It is thus that Assia Djebar has written of an independent Algeria where the bombs that nationalist women carried under their clothes, that they took out as if they were taking out their own breasts, exploded against them, right against them.⁴⁷ In the nationalist imaginary, women became the “embodiments



FIGURE 7. Original sketch by Albert Laprade, Morocco, 1926.

of cultural authenticity,” condemned as Lazreg has pointed out, to an “irremediable caricatural existence,” and eventually to the violence of an increasing fundamentalist “religiosity.”⁴⁸

As Dubey has noted, “the metaphorical figure of woman” had been conjured up “to resolve the inescapable contradiction” of the nationalist project: the contradiction of laying claim to “European categories of progress and modernity, while reviving precolonial traditions to safeguard the nation’s cultural difference from the West.”⁴⁹ But in postcolonial times, this figure congealed and froze, taking on the rigor of nationalism. If the colonial modern had been unraveled by the deployment of inauthentic traditions, then the postcolonial modern was sealed and delivered through the purification of tradition. That each has been an incomplete project, always contested, at times subverted, remains a cause for hope.⁵⁰



FIGURE 8. Artist rendering of squatter settlement, Colombia, 1983. Courtesy of UC Slide Library.

The Iconography of Squatting

It was in the last of the French colonies, Morocco, that the colonial policy of preserving native traditions was perhaps most assiduously enforced. This is roundly apparent in the careful sketches with which architects like Albert Laprade filled their notebooks: the detailing of traditional environments executed with a great deal of love and fondness (FIG. 7). Laprade’s sketches formed the basis for, among other things, the strange paradox of a “new medina” — the French re-creation of a Moroccan casbah, what Wright has called a “Disneyesque setting for local traditions.”⁵¹

These colonial sketches compare in provocative ways with a more recent sketch: that done in 1983 by a group of architecture students as they studied a squatter settlement in Colombia (FIG. 8). And this, in turn, contrasts provocatively with Popko’s 1978 black-and-white photo-documentary of squatting in Cali, Colombia (FIG. 9).⁵² It would be naïve to think of this as a simple distinction between representation and reality. Instead, what appears to be at issue are varying genealogies of representation. Like Laprade’s sketches, the student representation of squatting revives a distilled and pure form of tradition that can only be romanticized, that is worthy only of museums. Here, traditional practices are recovered as reservoirs of pure meaning, standing in timeless opposition to modernism and modernization.

Such representations deserve a closer look, mainly because of the populist ways in which the practices of the Third World poor are being increasingly recovered and celebrated in a whole range of debates and discourses. These span a spectrum from international shelter summits like Habitat II to the work of scholars concerned with housing and community management practices.⁵³ What is this tradition that is being revived? Who are the bearers of such traditions? By focusing on squatting, I would like to make two points.



FIGURE 9. Squatter settlement in Cali, Colombia. Courtesy of E. Popko, *Transitions: A Photographic Documentary of Squatter Settlements* (Stroudsburg: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1978).

The first concerns an iconography of urban informality. For some time there has been an interesting debate, some of it played out in this journal, that has cast urban informality as a distinctive source of vernacular aesthetics.⁵⁴ I am concerned here with how these traditions of informality are in fact intricately tied up with the question of the modern. Instead of seeing squatting as a traditional challenge to modernist environments, I think it may be better presented as a process that can only be understood through modernization, and through its universalist discourse of rights. Indeed, to frame the matter of Third World poverty as a question of local traditions that are somehow antithetical to modern ideals is to undermine the making and re-making of such modern claims, to deny the poor the right to participate in particular histories.

Second, I would like to point out how the tendency to celebrate the traditions of the poor uncritically, to see them as a rejection of modernism and modernization, is to negate any possibility of intervention and regularization.⁵⁵ It is to damn the poor to the fate of tradition in the belief that the assumed norms and efficiencies of the informal sector will somehow compensate for the inactions of neoliberalism.

I start with an example from a quintessentially modernist city, Brasilia. The city's designers, Costa and Niemeyer, were both deeply inspired by Le Corbusier and the modernist CIAM principles of the 1950s. However, in the competition for the city's master plan, Costa's entry won not so much as a tribute to Corbusian high modernism as for being a "personal muse, a vision of spontaneous origin." Oriented around the cross, this cavalier entry conjured up all kinds of significations, none of which were explicitly discussed.⁵⁶ Such a naturalization of the modern through the deployment of mythicized traditions is nothing new, but once again it points to the inherent corruptions of the modern. Rofel, quoting Nicholas Dirks, rightfully noted that "History is one of the most telling signs of the modern."⁵⁷

There is another set of images from Brasilia that I find compelling. It is of the squatter settlements that eventually came to ring the city. Costa, the city's planner, had refused to plan for a periphery, defying the socio-spatial patterns of Brazilian urbanization. But only a couple of years into the city's construction, thou-

sands of migrant workers began to set up shantytowns, eventually being absorbed into government-sponsored satellite towns. In a lively anthropological account of the city, Holston presented this as an unraveling of modernism: "the paradoxes of utopia that undermined its initial premises." But there was possibly more here than a simple unfolding of the inevitable constraints of modernization and modernism. My favorite image from Brasilia is of a squatter who has painted the symbols of the public mall, most notably the inverted arches of the presidential Planalto Palace designed by Niemeyer, on his shack at the periphery of the city (FIGS. 10, 11).⁵⁸ Herein, I think, is a distinctively public claim to space and place. It is an appropriation of a modernist heritage, and thereby of a modern future.⁵⁹

Let me offer another story in the same spirit. A great deal of my ethnographic research in Calcutta has been among squatter settlements. They are for the most part dismal places, marked by incredible poverty and a lack of the most basic of urban services. Despite all my hoped sophistications, in the last instance, at the end of long days of fieldwork, I judged this deprivation in comparison to a universalist ideal. Here was underdevelopment at its starkest. And yet one sultry evening as I was about to leave the settlement, I was stopped by a group of young squatter men. One of them, Ranjan, a lanky twenty-year-old with sparkling eyes, asked: "I have heard that there are homeless in America. How is that possible? Why doesn't the government allow them to simply take over vacant land like we have? Don't they have rights?" And in the face of all my explanations, he insisted: "If one is a citizen, one can't be homeless."

Ranjan's statement was a claim to modernity, to the promise of modernization, and to a universalist conception of citizenship. Accordingly, his words eroded the privileges of American democracy by highlighting the humiliations of homelessness. I, who had so arrogantly measured out Third World poverty, now had to peer through a different looking glass. Here, suddenly, the Third World squatter's patched-together home became an icon of the modern nation, while the shopping-cart-pushing, shelter-searching American homeless became the symbol of a perverse modernity. Whitman's commanding gaze had thus been unsettled.



FIGURE 10. (LEFT) Squatter shack outside Brasilia. Courtesy of UC Slide Library.

FIGURE 11. (RIGHT) Planalto Palace, Brasilia. Courtesy of UC Slide Library.

Yet, once again, I must sound a cautionary note. It would be a grave misunderstanding to interpret squatter settlements and their “rehearsal of the legitimate order” as a robust socio-spatial arrangement.⁶⁰ In my work on Calcutta, I have designated such forms of urban informality as a Faustian bargain, for they shift the burden of coping to the poor and often trap them in volatile cycles of patronage and dependence. For me, this was most poignantly reflected in the fact that exactly ten days after Ranjan had so defiantly asked me those questions, he and 900 other squatter families were evicted in a brutal demolition drive by the very same leftist government that had protected them for years.

With this in mind, let me reiterate two points. First, I see Ranjan’s question as a claim to modernity; but I also end his story on the note that it was precisely that: a claim always staked but never fulfilled. It is this ambiguity that marks the myth of the modern. Second, it is not only misleading to read such squatter practices as symbols of tradition, challenging the modern; it is perhaps also dangerous. The fragility of squatting makes it a sad model indeed for imagining a new millennium. Such “spontaneous traditions” present no alternative to the modern, but instead expectations thereof. Here, the end of the modern takes the form of betrayal rather than liberation.⁶¹ To continue the analogy of death, if this is the deathbed at which tradition is being revived, then the resurrection seems to have been only that of a ghost, elusive and devoid of content.

POST / MODERN

And so, if the death of the modern cannot be the occasion for the revival of authentic traditions, how else can this postmodern moment be conceptualized? I will conclude by offering the modest suggestion that the “post” may be seen not as the end of intellectual traditions, but as a surplus present within the modern itself. Indeed, I argue that this excess, the corruptions of the modern, offers renewed privileges of representation.

In some ways this may mean thinking about the end not so much as a temporal marker, but instead, as Gaonkar noted in his introduction to the “Alter/native Modernities” issue of *Public Culture*, as multiple modernities, as the emptying out of master narratives, as an “endlessly fading twilight.”⁶² To assert an abrupt and neat end — a bang, if you will — would be to deny the very spirit of interrogation that I hope accompanies the “post.” Indeed, it was a master of modernist narrations, T.S. Eliot, who wrote not simply of death and living, but of the “Shadow” that falls between.⁶³

There are perhaps two ways of interpreting this shadowed moment. The first is through the trope of waiting. I was reminded of this by a recent piece written by Edward Said on the peace process in the Middle East.⁶⁴ Likening the situation to Samuel Becket’s *Waiting for Godot*, Said wrote of a “frozen state of clown-like, pathetic banality.” My father sent me Said’s piece from Calcutta, writing that this beloved

city of his and mine, this dying and decrepit place, represented another such impasse, a state of perpetual paralysis.

Said goes on to describe another narration of waiting, a poem by the fin-de-siècle poet Constantine Cavafy called “Waiting for the Barbarians.” The poem repeatedly asks: “What are we waiting for?” In response, there is a recurring refrain: “The barbarians are due here today.” And so the senators sit without legislating, and the emperor waits at the city’s main gate, ready with a scroll, replete with titles.

But the barbarians never come. And there are even rumors from the borders that there are no barbarians any longer.

*And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.*⁶⁵

Is it possible to act and speak when the traditional enemies are no longer present? When the purity of waiting is shattered?

Perhaps there is another way to interpret the not-coming of the barbarians. This is the recognition that the sudden disappearance of the Other is occasion for a new engagement, a creative liminality. And it is this possibility that I hope to articulate, chiefly through a brief re-presentation of some of René Magritte’s paintings.

There are many narratives, visual and otherwise, that I could have chosen to make this point, but I think the work of Magritte is valuable for a few reasons. First, it brilliantly articulates the tensions between the modern and the postmodern. This is where the “Shadow” falls. Further, Magritte was able to map this liminality because of his corruption of visual images.⁶⁶ In other words, he was able to visually foreground the surplus, the inauthentic, that I have hitherto been seeking to signal.

For example, in *The Human Condition* (1933), Magritte called into question the very possibility of representative affirmation (FIG. 12). Here is a canvas; here an open window. The eye, the longing eye, tells us that the painting corresponds to the outside view that is hidden. But does it? As Foucault rightly noted,



FIGURE 12.
R. Magritte, *The Human Condition* (1933). Oil on canvas, 100 x 73cm. Private Collection, Monte Carlo.

it is the provocative use of the old space of representation that makes the deconstruction, the interrogation, so powerful.⁶⁷

A similar displacement attends the film *Battle of Algiers* and its style of pseudo-documentation.⁶⁸ Pontecorvo deliberately used documentary techniques, creating an air of objectivity. In fact, it was this very claim to objectivity that Louis Malle deployed when he showed the previously banned film in Paris. But Pontecorvo clearly stated at the beginning of his film that not a single documentary reel was used. The tension between this mimetic technique and the staging of content creates an ambiguity that is highly provocative. The screen, like Magritte's canvases, has a "mimetic overflowing" that is at once modern and much more than the modern.⁶⁹

But such questionings of visual representation are now commonplace, particularly in an arena such as this journal and association. I thus present a second Magritte image to instigate an equal complication of the question of speech and text. In perhaps his most famous work, *The Treachery of Images* (1926), Magritte challenged the relationship between word-sign and essential origin (FIG. 13). It is interesting to note that Le Corbusier had, in 1923, held up the image of a pipe as an image of pure functionalism. Some critics like Hughes have speculated that Magritte intended his painting as a rejoinder to this assertion.⁷⁰

What is this image? Foucault described it thus:

A carefully drawn pipe and underneath it (handwritten in a steady, painstaking, artificial script, a script from the convent, like that found heading the notebooks of schoolboys, or on a blackboard after an object lesson), this note: This is not a pipe.

Foucault interpreted the canvas as a challenge to the possibility of textual representation (yes, of course this is not a pipe, but a painting of a pipe). It indicates, he noted, "the penetration of discourse into the form of things." But more importantly, Foucault saw it as a heterotopia, secretly undermining language and stopping words in their tracks. His particular term for it is instructive: a "calligram," a picture-word that is constructed and then allowed to collapse "of its own weight." It is interesting to note that Foucault and Magritte exchanged letters on these matters, and much of their correspondence was concerned with the relation between words and signs, between text and visuality.⁷¹

In this spirit I will end by discussing another calligram, one that also erodes the consolation of utopias, but which raises the hope of more, of the "post" as life and living.



FIGURE 13.
R. Magritte, *The Treachery of Images* (1926). Oil on canvas, 60 x 81cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

My story comes from one of my favorite novels, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.⁷² Set in a phantasmic town called Macondo on the edge of a vast South American swamp, the novel details the events following the appearance of "Sir Francis Drake, the pirate." At one point, the town comes to be afflicted with a plague that leads to the loss of memory. As the town slowly loses its collective memory, one of its leaders, Aureliano, conceives of a formula: he writes down words on pieces of paper and attaches them to the respective objects. Soon all objects are labeled: table, chair, clock, and so forth. But then Aureliano realizes that these labels make no sense if people forget the use of the objects. And so he is more explicit. He hangs a sign on the cow that says: "This is the cow. She must be milked every morning. The milk must be boiled and then drunk with coffee." And he creates two important signs — one that marks the town, "Macondo," and the other, a larger one on the main road, that says "God Exists."

After a while, even these instructions are not enough to retain for the town the meaning of the written word. Eventually, they turn to the village fortune teller. Once, she had used her cards to tell the future. Now she uses them to tell the past. And so the town begins to live a past reconstructed as the uncertain alternatives of the cards.

The town's forgetfulness is a different kind of calligram. In Magritte unsettled the visual present by attaching the "wrong" word to the "wrong picture," then Garcia Marquez has presented a calligram that collapses because of a corruption of verbal history.⁷³ Here, the past is deeply tainted by forgetfulness, by a fortune teller's imagination, and the ambiguities of the written word. This is an ending, one where the end of modernist and linear time is tied to the end of tradition, the forgetting of the most mundane of traditions. And yet this is also an allegory of living, where the future is made possible through the impossibility of remembering an authentic past.

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