

## A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

M.W. Messmer

S.A. Messmer

Virginia Commonwealth University

From time to time within the American academic world certain words become focal points around which current anxieties and hopes coalesce. During the decade of the nineteen sixties "relevant" was such a key word, and at the present moment "interdisciplinary" appears to have become another. It would be difficult to find an institution of higher learning in the contemporary United States in which an interdisciplinary program of one sort or another was not being pursued by at least a part of the faculty. Our own recent experience with teaching an interdisciplinary course has led us to raise some questions about the nature of most such endeavors in the contemporary academic world.

We titled our course "The Origins of Modernism, 1880-1930," and in it we attempted an investigation of the interconnections between social, intellectual, and artistic change in Europe during this crucial half century in an effort to locate the origins of contemporary artistic and intellectual experience.<sup>1</sup> We hoped to be able to bring our respective competencies as historian and art historian together and in doing so to open for the students a new window on the past which they could not have found in either an art history or a history course dealing with this period. By and large we felt that aim was accomplished, and by semester's end were satisfied that we had produced a course in which the contiguity of two established disciplines had been shown to be more than just a common possession of the word "history."

The methodological guidelines we employed in the presentation of our material may be embodied in two Principles, the Principle of Definition by Itemization and the Principle of Juxtaposition. Thus, we began the course with an attempt to delineate "the name and nature of modernism" through elaboration of a set of modernist themes around which we then constructed a series of co-ordinated lectures designed to integrate our backgrounds in intellectual and art history respectively.<sup>2</sup> We confronted the problems of definition and temporal delimitation crucial to any inquiry into modernist culture and its origins through this simple device of listing salient aspects of cultural life in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then by applying the Principle of Juxtaposition we illustrated them using some of the major intellectual and artistic documents of the period.

For example, we complemented a discussion of primitivism in modernist art with lectures on Durkheim, Frazer, and Conrad as representatives of the pervasive modernist fascination with the primitive. Similarly, the students' reading of a Kafka story, a classroom discussion of Edvard Munch and some of the German expressionists, and a lecture on Freud effectively illustrated the ubiquity as well as the diversity of efforts to uncover and analyze the irrational in human beings and their societies which characterized the modernist period. The core of the course thus consisted of extended analyses of themes which continually appear and re-appear in the works of modernist artists and thinkers.

Such juxtaposition of complementary material is a simple enough procedure, and one we feel is probably standard in courses of this type. Indeed, such cooperation (the current key word here is "team-teaching") is so readily effected and the appeal to students so easily manifested that the instructors in such a course can readily come to the conclusion that what they have been doing is "interdisciplinary" in both content and method. It is with such a conclusion that we now entertain serious doubts.

Our discontents begin with that much-used and much-abused item of academic parlance, the word "innovative." A brief survey of the undergraduate catalogs from a representative sample of American institutions of higher learning quickly reveals that in the past decade or so the modernist period as we demarcated it has increasingly become the subject of courses in intellectual and cultural history. Thus, our course was innovative within the context of our particular institution, but typical in the broader context of American universities taken collectively. While this may simply index a time-lag in curricular change, it is nevertheless disturbing when "keeping up" becomes "innovative."

We feel a similar uneasiness with the term "interdisciplinary." The Principle of Juxtaposition noted above capsulizes our notion that much of what passes for interdisciplinary teaching is simply the placing side by side of instructors from two different departments in the same classroom. There are important pedagogical benefits to be derived from the operation of this Principle, but the Principle itself is by no means the revolution in teaching which it is often represented to be by overenthusiastic deans, department heads, and curriculum committees. If "cooperative" rather than "interdisciplinary" is an accurate descriptive term for teaching according to this Principle, so too is "inter-departmental." But again, we would argue that what is "inter-departmental" is not necessarily "interdisciplinary." The departmental structuring of American higher education leads all too easily to the assumption that denizens of departments of art history have custodial rights and authority over inquiry into and teaching of that segment of humanity's past activities which can be labelled (under current definitions) "art"; similarly, it leads to the easy assumption that the occupants of positions in history departments have, by virtue of that occupancy, proprietary rights over inquiry into the collective past of humankind. Such confusion of "department" and "discipline" must be recognized as an artifact of the development of higher education in the past century; if it is, then the breaking down or crossing of a departmental boundary must be seen as something quite different than the breaking down of a barrier between intellectual disciplines. We would assert here that substantive interdisciplinary teaching is better effected through the integration in the mind of a single scholar-teacher of the methodology of several disciplines, even though that process is more arduous, longer, and much less easily attained than the co-operation effected through the Principle of Juxtaposition. Hence we conclude that the adjective "co-operative" better describes what happens in the bulk of so-called interdisciplinary courses and that the latter adjective, if it is to mean anything at all, be reserved for those much less frequent manifestations of erasure of disciplinary boundaries in the work of individual scholars and the classroom manifestations of that work.

Here our own experience is exemplary. In the actual preparation for and teaching of the course the segments concerned with "art" were handled by the art historian, those with "history" by the historian. Thus, the very structure of the course itself, while it was clearly co-operative and inter-departmental, preserved in its division of intellectual labor an existing disciplinary boundary. Yet another opportunity to begin effecting the restoration of a unified approach to the past had been lost, as such opportunities have been lost since the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The problems in effecting truly interdisciplinary approaches can be seen in retrospect by noting the dramatically increased difficulties if the intellectual division of labor had been preserved but the tasks reversed: namely, having the "historian" prepare the sections of the course on "art" and vice versa.

Still another discontent centers around the role which courses such as ours play as institutions in what Stanley Aronowitz has called "mass audience culture." Aronowitz notes that: "The institutions of mass audience culture possess remarkable power to incorporate and degrade any artistic work that can



be comprehended without critical reflection."<sup>4</sup> The university has surely become a major institution of mass audience culture, and Aronowitz's analysis raised in our minds the possibility that our course itself, despite its purpose of stimulating critical reflection, might in fact have served to aid the process of incorporation and degradation of artistic works.<sup>5</sup> Was it not possible that our course had made a very minor contribution to the easy (and ultimately uncritical) appropriation of its subject matter? To quote Aronowitz again: "A society characterized by the pervasive penetration of the commodity into all corners of the social world, including the arts, may force the artist away from representation in order to prevent integration."<sup>6</sup> May such a society not also force the university instructor away from his or her traditional forms of representation to prevent such integration? Universities exist in part to provide a means whereby students may appropriate a portion of their society's cultural endowment, and our course may stand as an example of that appropriation process. Even more clearly, however, a major purpose of universities in contemporary America is the integration of individuals within existing society. From this perspective our course became simply another commodity in the cultural marketplace, one which in the Marxist idiom would have a certain exchange value (three credits toward a degree, development of the ability to speak intelligently on modernist art, etc.) but no use value.<sup>7</sup>

Further reflection on the problem of representation alluded to above suggested to us that we had lost an important opportunity to learn from the protagonists in our course itself. More than a decade ago, in a provocative article on "The Burden of History," Hayden White addressed the question of the relationship between history as an art and the artistic developments of the period since the mid-nineteenth century. He wrote that: "when historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of late-nineteenth century social science and mid-nineteenth century art." In a complex argument White then went on to suggest the possibility of using contemporary artistic insights in historical inquiry and representation, since "we should no longer naively expect that statements about a given epoch or complex of events in the past 'correspond' to some pre-existent body of 'raw facts.'" Extrapolating from White's argument, we ask whether it would be possible to use artistic insights of the modernist period in the teaching of a course on that period itself? As White noted: "There have been no significant attempts at surrealist, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves) for all of the vaunted 'artistry' of the historians of modern times." We suspect that that statement applies equally to the teaching of history. For the moment we are simply asking whether it might not be possible to develop new ways of teaching history based upon the artistic insights of the modernist period, thus permitting historians in the classroom "to conceive of the possibility of using impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealist, and (perhaps) even actionist modes of representation for dramatizing the significance of data which they have uncovered but which, all too frequently, they are prohibited from seriously contemplating as evidence."<sup>8</sup>

In a more general vein we now ask whether another different, but related opportunity to that implied in White's discussion had not also been lost in our course as it was initially taught. It is a commonplace that modernist practice in the arts has frequently been based upon an inquiry into the notion of art itself, an inquiry which has often proceeded in a sceptical mode.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for many modernist painters the art of painting was conceived as constituting an inquiry into the very possibility and meaning of painting itself. Similarly much modernist writing has constituted an inquiry into the meaning of the act of writing per se. This intense self-questioning of modernist artists was integral to their work and constitutes perhaps the single most important lesson for anyone engaged in teaching a course on the modernist

period. Must not the teaching process itself constitute an interrogation, a questioning, as the process takes place? We think now that it must. Had not our own pedagogy, proceeding as it did under the mode of realism and attempting to depict for students a segment of the past as it actually was, not betrayed the crucial modernist notion of practice as an inquiry into its own powers? We think now that it did. In short, to take seriously White's notion of the use of modernist insights in the depiction of the past implies a radical re-thinking of the pedagogical process which we suspect would have far-reaching implications for the teaching of history. The current popularity of inter-departmental and co-operative courses testifies to the continued presence in classroom pedagogy, of modes of expression which are accurately described as "pre-modernist." Indeed, it may be the courses which are described as "innovative" and "interdisciplinary" which now pose the subtlest yet strongest obstacle to what might be called modernist teaching. Courses such as ours, while successful as commodities in the academic marketplace, nevertheless preserve, under the guise of innovation, an intellectual division of labor, a fragmented approach to knowledge of the past, and an institutional structure whose obsolescence is best indicated by the confidence with which various academic professors accept their proclaimed innovativeness without question.

We confess at this point to being at a loss in attempting to discover precisely how diverse modes of representation derived from modernist culture might be used in the classroom.<sup>10</sup> Despite the success of courses such as "The Origins of Modernism, 1880-1930," we nevertheless fear that they risk filling students with what Nietzsche called "indigestible knowledge stones."<sup>11</sup> It is a situation which recalls to mind Kandinsky's words describing people poring over a museum exhibition catalog: "All this [an artist's works] is carefully reproduced in a book with the name of the artist and the name of the picture. Book in hand, people go from wall to wall, turning pages, reading names. Then they depart, neither richer nor poorer, again absorbed by their affairs, which have nothing to do with art."<sup>12</sup> Although Kandinsky's words occur in the context of his critique of art for art's sake, they ring true if transposed into the context of the place of education in a mass audience culture. Perhaps the teaching of history at this point suffers most from its very successes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Copies of the course syllabus are available upon request.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapter entitled "The Name and Nature of Modernism," in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., Modernism 1890-1930 (New York, 1976), 19-55. Two examples of Definition by Itemization applied to the modernist period are: Irving Howe, "The Idea of the Modern," in Irving Howe, ed., The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts (New York, 1967), 11-40, and Ihab Hassan, "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography," in his Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times (Urbana, Illinois, 1975), 39-59.

<sup>3</sup> An interesting discussion of this loss of a unified perspective is provided by Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Tasks of Historical Social Science: An Editorial," Review, I, (Summer, 1977), 3-7.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, "Culture and Politics," Politics and Society, VI (1976), 390.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Lasch makes a similar point: "It is an occupational hazard of what is called intellectual history that it often results in taking no ideas seriously. The fact of their historical origin, that is, is taken as evidence of their fallibility. Historical relativism--the nearest thing in this



country to a philosophy of history--tells us that one idea is as good as another." See Lasch's introduction to Russell Jacoby, Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing (Boston, 1975), x.

<sup>6</sup>Aronowitz, "Culture and Politics," 391.

<sup>7</sup>A stimulating discussion of knowledge as a commodity is Anthony Wilden, "Introduction: The Scientific Discourse: Knowledge as a Commodity," in his System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange (London, 1972), xvii-xxx, esp. xxiii-xxix. A complementary perspective is provided in Marshall Berman, "'All That is Solid Melts into Air': Marxism, Modernism, Modernization," Dissent, XXV, (Winter 1978), 54-74, esp. 68-71.

<sup>8</sup>Hayden V. White, "The Burden of History," History and Theory, V (1966), 127-131.

<sup>9</sup>A representative recent statement of this view is contained in Susan Sontag's essay "Photographic Evangels" in her On Photography (New York, 1977), 115-149.

<sup>10</sup>A possible beginning point might be with the oft-noted hostility to narrative in much modernist literature and art. Are not most "courses" examples of narrativity, of attempts to structure "subject matter" between a "beginning" and an "end"? Our original approach to the modernist period took such a narrative form, thus exemplifying what one might call the movement to movement or -ism to -ism approach. But, isn't the crucial modernist questioning of narrative certainties betrayed in the very teaching of such a course which accepts a narrative mode as its basis? For some acute remarks on the question of narrativity, see Leo Bersani, "The Other Freud," Humanities in Society, I (Winter, 1978), 35-49.

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Use and Abuse of History, tr. Adrian Collins (Indianapolis, 1957), 23.

<sup>12</sup>Wassily Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," in Eugen Weber, ed., Paths to the Present: Aspects of European Thought from Romanticism to Existentialism (New York, 1973), 213.