

# all that is solid...

Flux, mutability and *dynamism* are the marks of modern capitalism. While these are potentially *positive* characteristics, their elusive, intangible qualities leave sources of power incapable of being grasped and, therefore, challenged. The inaccessibility of capitalist power centres is a well-established theme, from Marxist alienation to Kafkaesque bureaucracy; these elements are still overwhelmingly present in contemporary society, but it is the *cloud-world* we now inhabit that distinguishes our contemporary experience from the industrial and post-industrial capitalism that the 20th century endured. Global and digital, the world is at our fingertips, but always out of reach.

Artistic movements, particularly in the 20th century, are indicative of such facts. In the inter-war period, Futurists lauded the conveyor belt and the chimney stack. Man, in this utopian/dystopian vision, was to be enhanced by, and ultimately synonymous with, the machine. Art was to embody and champion this technocratic world, *harnessing* its power rather than relying on nostalgic challenges to its very newness.

The Futurists were mocked by the Vorticists for being so enamoured of, and enchanted by, this apparently alien new technology. Not that the Vorticists were opposed to the basic principle of *futurism/modernism*, quite the opposite. Rather, they found the Futurists' wide-eyed excitement quaint. Wyndham Lewis, so he condescendingly informed Marinetti, had been surrounded by machines and factories all his life. England was *au fait* with industry and more assuredly blasé than the Italians who were still emerging, sleepy-eyed, from an agricultural slumber. The Vorticists' art therefore represented a vision of modern technology from the perspective of an industrial native – this was no conscious attempt to *explore* the machine-aesthetic, but a natural consequence of a life lived in smog, a baby born in the machine-belly.

There's a complex relationship to Marxism in all this painterly engagement with early 20th century modernity. Marx's shadow hangs over the whole period, being a quasi-deific intellectual presence, but also because his vision of alienation is (ostensibly) tied to the production line, the factory and the suppression of labour value by the efficiencies of the (then) modern mechanical process. This is, however, a narrow characterisation of Marx: as John Lanchester points out in a recent LRB article, 'surplus value' (the gap between your labour cost, and your employer's profit ['labour objectified in a commodity']) is still as much a driving force of capitalism as it was in the days of the Fordian factory floor – the contemporary digitisation of so many products and services simply displaces and disperses the surplus value across the globe. The oppressed proletariat aren't huddled together in Manchester mills, but scouring websites in China and India. Capitalism has moved to its post-post-industrial phase – it has the same underbelly with a new face, and that face is a virtual switchboard. So, this new capitalism is hidden. Operating, as Zizek would say, at the level of ideology. Where the exploitation of labour used to be written into every nut and bolt on a shiny new object, we now encounter 'hygienic', digital veneers that hide a scattered web of labour transactions, wage slavery and exploitation behind an incorporeal homepage and impersonal auto-emails.

It's widely acknowledged that capitalism has mastered the art of ideological control – Mark Fisher's wonderfully

succinct *Capitalist Realism* dissects this remarkable feat of total ideological domination, explaining how capitalism has managed to smuggle its fundamental ideological tenets in as basic truths. We don't simply accept the capitalist world-view as, say, better than communism; we don't know that what we are accepting is a capitalist world-view. Central to this achievement, it has to be said, is capitalism's productivity, the *apparent* lack of viable alternatives and an ever-increasing concentration of power in capitalist hands. However, what strikes me as a particularly contemporary aspect of this dominance is its mutability, its dispersion and its *intangibility* [1].

It's not simply a neat parallel that we live in an age of the intangible (digital, virtual) and that capitalism's 'face' has become increasingly elusive – these facts are directly related. As aforementioned, the abundance of 'virtual' products and e-commerce means that surplus value, the life-blood of capitalism for Marx, is now incredibly difficult to locate. Forget the alienated factory worker repetitively screwing nuts, we now have outsourced workforces scattered across the globe contributing weird and intangible labour to the convoluted and complex process of contemporary production. Marketing departments, content management firms, consultancies, think-tanks, data analysts, researchers and so on all hand over some labour in the manufacture of a Coke can, let alone the people who actually *make the product*. On top of that, we have products that are *themselves intangible*, designed by a Scandinavian, hosted on an American website, administered by an Indian IT department and, you can guarantee, someone, somewhere is being badly underpaid.

This global dispersion and intangibility is an incredibly effective shield for any potential threats to capitalism – the proletariat are utterly dislocated and disenfranchised; they can't organise at the working men's club or union rally. Equally, no-one is responsible for anything – that department deals with this, our office in Taiwan sorts out those queries. Who's in charge? That depends.

There can be no storming of the Winter Palace – it's hosted on a server, and it's backed up. Any revolutionary instinct is quickly diluted by frustration and channelled into disillusionment and detachment. As I write, British voters are rapidly turning away from the mainstream political parties (a rudderless Labour party led by Ed Miliband, reduced to desperate pasty-purchasing stunts, has just lost a safe seat to cat impersonator and part-time politician, George Galloway) and political discourse in America has become so absurd as to warrant bafflement and extreme cynicism. There is something of a different mood outside of the West, which I will return to below, but the noble attempts by the Occupy movement to emulate Middle Eastern anger were easily swallowed and laughed off – recast as a subset of the trendy counter-culturalism that now exists entirely *within* the mainstream.

How does this all relate to the Vorticists and the Futurists? Well, the 20th century was marked by industrial and post-industrial capitalism – a technological paradigm shift (the Industrial Revolution) was followed by a period of radical change, displacement and rupturing. An ideological vacuum gave way to an emerging power struggle between competing systems; art was forced to *deal with* this state of affairs and contribute to the necessary interpretation and cultural digestion of this new era. An aesthetic was developed that attempted to understand and, in its own way, *transform* the technology, interpreted as the symbolic and actual agent of change – changing means of production produces changing forms of life, changing relations within society. Art is a part of this process and – when it tries very hard – an *active* part.

The development of Brutalist architecture represents a tangible residue of the modernist engagement with societal/technological change: rhetoric instigated by Malevich and Lewis and developed by Rodchenko and Popova was actualised by Tatlin and the Smithsons. The explosive visual freedom engendered by Cubism crystallised into the hard-edged, rectilinear forms of Lewis and Bomberg and was set in concrete by the Brutalists. The rough-and-ready functionalism of industry was *made visible* by modernist utopian artworks,

helping to generate a sense of coherence and action that informed visions of the future – what are often seen as cold, rational, harsh forms actually indicate a profound optimism and an existentialist affirmation of freedom.

A period of uncertainty and disengagement has followed the strident wartime /post-war activity that galvanised modernism. I think that we are beginning to come to terms with our present situation thanks, in part, to a clearer idea of the technological implications of the digital age, nevertheless, we can't deny our own historical position. Like Vrubel's demon, we sit uncomfortably on a precipice, looking tentatively towards a shapeless, fragmented distance. The *Seated Demon* doesn't look outwards with a fierce intent or galvanising hope, but a melancholic withdrawal. This painting was painted in 1890, a time at which the Industrial Revolution had established its technological impact, but hadn't yet foreshadowed the 20th century's cultural and political revolutions. Similarly, we exist in the unsettled dust of the collapse of ideological competition and in the immediate aftermath of a technological revolution – the digital age has dawned, the internet is well-established, but its liberating potential has yet to be fully exploited. If the Vorticists were the first industrial natives, we are the first digital ones, totally wired.

[1] As I suggested, these aren't necessarily loaded with negative connotations – flexibility and *progress* can be considered massive advantages of capitalism (as Marx noted) but Fisher characterises the system as like *The Thing*, consuming and distorting its victims as it responds to their challenges. Anti-capitalist or counter-cultural movements are caricatured and assimilated into mainstream culture. 'Alternative' or 'Indie' genres are easily accommodated into hyper-capitalist consumerism: look at Topshop Guevara T-shirts and HMV Cobain posters; Jack Dee did an advert, Ben Elton made a musical.