Reviews


Paul Greenhalgh was formerly on the staff of the V&A, where he curated the *Art Nouveau* exhibition in 2000, and is now President of NSCAD University in Canada. In this wide-ranging and ambitious book, he offers an account of the development of Western art since the eighteenth century, which he argues centres on the idea of simplicity. This idea he traces to the humanistic thinkers of the Enlightenment, who, in response to the social process of modernisation, rejected religion and tradition and looked forward to a new world to be founded on rationality and progress. Evidence is given to show that this simplifying idea found its full embodiment in the Modernism of the early twentieth century, only to falter and founder from the 1970s as various forms of Postmodernism asserted the irrelevance of the grand narrative of Modernism along with all the other grand narratives of history. The design of the book itself is suggestive of the position Greenhalgh occupies: the typography is plainly modernist, but the use of bright colours decidedly post-modern. The result is a brash and visually attractive book.

Greenhalgh is fond of triads, and claims that modernity passed through three stages, the speculative – that of the Enlightenment; the material – from the mid-eighteenth century; and the ideological – from 1890 to around 1980. He sees it as Utopian in its ambition to create a better world by using the power of technology, and coming to an end when Postmodernism exposed its contradictions and evasions. Greenhalgh also sees the ways in which artists engaged with moderni-
ty as triadic: for him, they represent 'three dispositions', namely Idealism, Radical critique, and Reportage. The Idealists — his main concern in this book — saw themselves as participating in the Utopian process of re-ordering society; the radical critics drew attention to all the dangers and inhumanities of modernisation; and the reporters simply recorded without taking sides.

Morris is given a significant position on this story. He first appears as part of the Design Reform movement of the nineteenth century, along with Viollet-le-Duc in France and Gottfried Semper in Germany, all of whom 'foregrounded an idealist approach to theory and practice', which was to lead in the twentieth century to 'the definitive rise and triumph of an art-led modernist idealism, which penetrated all forms of practice' and developed into 'a Utopian vision intended to reform the entire built environment'. This is said to have developed in parallel with the view of an artist like Mondrian that 'his paintings were a template for a total mode of existence' (p. 31) — though we are not told much about what this mode of existence would have been like. But there was clearly a Utopian enthusiasm at work here. Greenhalgh points out that this could take both benevolent and dangerous forms, so that for him it brings 'into uncomfortable proximity such progenitors and polemicists as William Morris, Oscar Wilde, Frank Lloyd Wright, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Adolf Hitler and Pol Pot' (p. 39). Greenhalgh likes making challenging lists of this kind, to stimulate the reader to examine his or her presuppositions about a subject like Utopianism. This listing can be found again in a discussion of 'The Metaphysics of Institutionalisation' — Greenhalgh is drawn to abstraction nouns — where he contrasts enthusiasts for change and technology, exemplified by Prince Albert, Lenin, Mussolini, J. F. Kennedy, Margaret Thatcher and George W. Bush, with those resistant to change and technology, specifically Captain Ludd, William Morris, the Pennsylvania Dutch, Mahatma Gandhi, Pol Pot and the Dalai Lama. The convincing point that emerges from this is that attitudes to technology and change can take all sorts of political forms: 'It was the politics of destruction or augmentation of the natural order, according to one's point of view' (p. 69).

Morris finds himself in another list a little later under the heading 'Artistic Responses to Technology':

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From the romantic outbursts against machine conformity through the last three centuries, of William Blake, Charles Baudelaire, William Morris, Tristan Tzara, Andre Breton, Jean Baudrillard and many others, to the euphoric celebrations of mechanised power of Josiah Wedgwood, Joseph Wright of Derby, Christopher Dresser, F. T. Marinetti, Fernand Leger or Serge Chermayeff, arts commentators had a very strong sense of what technology was doing to them. (p.73)

But the fullest account of Morris occurs in a long section on ‘Alienation’, in which the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement are very fairly and illuminatingly described. Greenhalgh observes: ‘The division of labour was rejected in favour of fabrication that allowed the workmen, as social beings, to engage ideas and skill’.

Morris’s influence is said to have extended to ‘such diverse practitioners as Art Nouveau designers Emile Galle and Henri van der Velde, modernist architect and first director of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, and seminal modern potter Bernard Leach’ (p.93). Following Morris, Walter Crane is quoted on art as ‘the spontaneous expression of the life and aspirations of a free people’. Greenhalgh notes of Crane that ‘His socialism edged into a kind of anarchist Utopianism that was not unusual within the Movement’ (p. 94). We can see this now as part of the complex process of social development in the early twentieth century as the Labour movement tried to mitigate the power of capital.

A later reference to Morris concerns Arts and Crafts’ hostility to Aestheticism, which is attributed to ‘a draconian moralism learned from Ruskin’ as well as, more persuasively, to ‘an inherent dislike of cosmopolitanism’ (p. 134). A more stylistic point is made in the discussion of the development of simplicity as an artistic ideal in the wake of the Great Exhibition. Greenhalgh draws attention to two aspects of this in relation to the Design Reform movement. He claims that in the later nineteenth century ‘nature became the stylistic template for advanced design’ (p. 161). But nature had to be treated in particular ways, through conventionalisation and through seeking to reproduce its structural logic. Morris is referred to under the first principle, as one of those ‘committed to the ordering of nature on the surface of things’ (p. 162), though Christopher Dresser is Greenhalgh’s preferred example of a designer embracing both principles.

The story that Greenhalgh tells here thus includes Morris as one of
its significant participants. But, as implied earlier, Greenhalgh sees Modernism as having faltered under Postmodernist criticism in the 1970s – he refers particularly to work by Theodor Adorno in politics, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard in social philosophy, and Stephen Jay Gould in science, all of which is said, convincingly, to have contributed to the loss of belief in progress and the assertion of a sceptical relativism that are characteristic of Postmodernism. However, Greenhalgh is bold enough to go beyond this point. In his final section, he discusses ‘The Ingredients of the Next Modern’, the movement, ideology or style that he hopes will emerge from the debris of the Postmodern to justify the claims of art in the near future by asserting its universality. In this context, Greenhalgh asserts, ‘One of the grand voices for the past is of use here’ (p. 253). He then quotes a well-known passage from William Morris’s 1883 lecture ‘The Lesser Arts’: ‘I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few …’ Greenhalgh suggests that ‘If we substitute “progress” for “art” in this statement, we have the beginnings of a politics of progress’ – clearly the idea or ideal that he wishes to promulgate. The idea of progress is not to be abandoned, but it must be extended:

Progress should always engage with the excitement of human achievement, in the joy of moon-landings. But there should be no joy anywhere while half of us are starving to death. (p. 253)

I am slightly uncomfortable with the use of ‘us’ here; starvation is fortunately uncommon in the West where we and Greenhalgh live. But it is a matter of both surprise and acclamation that a writer today should show himself unafraid to claim a grand future for art in the service of a universal human ideal, and pleasing to find him using Morris as an inspiration for that project.

Peter Faulkner