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The Legacy of Modernism and the Imperative of Modernity

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Modernism and the Play of Shadows

In 1989, I published *Romantiikka ja postmoderni* (the romantic and the postmodern), a collection of criticism, essays and art projects. The book was a personal experiment in interpreting postmodern changes in the art and culture of the West, including the former Soviet Union. A local point of view was important here, too. I approached Romanticism through the history of criticism in Finland, and I focused on cultural differences between Moscow, Berlin and New York, as well as Helsinki and Tallinn.

In the mid-1980s, when I wrote most of these pieces, the concept of the postmodern was in the process of creation. The category was still open and being argued about, and there was great intellectual curiosity surrounding it. One of the theses of my book was an analogy between the Modern and Postmodern vis-à-vis the Enlightenment and Romanticism. I thought the way that Romanticism undermined the ideas of the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century provided a means of understanding the postmodern deconstruction of the modern(ist) legacy.

Soon, it became clear to me that my book had an implicit or even explicit idea of the modern which was not necessarily based on concrete studies, but on the postmodern discourse of the time. This 'high modern(ism)' was characterized by attributes such as: (narrowly) rational, analytical, universal(izing), progressive, linear, objectifying and masculine. In art it meant abstraction, minimalism and formalism, traditions growing out of the idea of the autonomy of art. All this was deeply indebted to the heritage of the Enlightenment. However, the postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity presumed a romantic idea of genius as an aspect of modernism.

Was this notion of 'high modernism' fact or fiction? Did it really tell us about modernism, or about the theoretical needs of postmodern discourse? A way to try to answer this was to test out the problem through concrete historical research.

My chosen topic for study was Sigurd Frosterus (1876-1956), a Finnish architect, critic and essayist, and one of the leading intellectuals in Finland during the first half of the 20th century. His theoretical work illustrates the question both internationally and locally. Frosterus was an intellectual cosmopolitan and he was well aware of the developments in art and theory in different traditions in Europe and the United States. Writing in Swedish, he was active in Scandinavia, and especially in Finland, and his work also took on a strong local specificity.

Frosterus began his career as a critic in 1901, when he published an admiring essay about Otto Wagner's constructive architecture. The young critic developed his rationalist program, in 1904 writing a manifesto that opposed Finnish national-romantic architecture, especially the designs by Eliel Saarinen's studio, which he equated with decadent tendencies in Austrian architecture, such as the many works by Joseph Maria Olbrich, a pupil of Wagner. Besides Wagner, Frosterus was attracted to Henry van de Velde's rationalist art-nouveau aesthetics and was influenced by it. He also practised for a period in van de Velde's bureau in Weimar in 1903-4.

As an art critic Frosterus was inspired by ideas of pure visuality. In the early years of the 20th century, he admired Giovanni Segantini's fresh, serious painting as a brave symbol of the new age, as well as James McNeill Whistler's uncompromising, if arrogant, aspirations towards painterly qualities per se. A little later, the theory of Post-Impressionism caught his attention.

Frosterus' intellectual interests were vast. He was fascinated by H.G. Wells' visions of the future, and he even wrote his first book about the British science-fiction novelist in 1906. Friedrich Nietzsche as a personality and philosopher was a harbinger and forerunner of Frosterus, as of so many intellectuals of his generation. While working in van de Velde's bureau in Weimar, Frosterus also became acquainted with the philosopher's sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

Among his many interests Frosterus wrote about aeroplanes, Atlantic-express ships and modern weapons. His 1907 essay about the Dreadnought, a modern British type of battleship, was cynical but elegant. Frosterus thought that, rather than Pre-Raphaelite painting, the Dreadnought should be considered a piece of art, as should the London

underground railway system.

The first collection of Frosterus' essays "Olikartade skönhetsvärden" (various beauty values), came out in 1915. The book can be considered one of the leading theoretical contributions to rationalist modernism in Finland, or maybe in Scandinavia, before the end of the First World War. In the same year, Frosterus published another book, "Moderna vapen" (modern weapons). Two years later in 1917, came his "Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg" (the triumph of rainbow colours) and "Solljus och slagskugga" (sunlight and shadows cast). With these works Frosterus took the leading position in the theoretical avant-garde of rationalist modernism in Finland.

After the First World War, Frosterus continued to publish philosophical essays, paying special attention to questions of technology. His worldview, now influenced by Oswald Spengler's criticism of western civilisation, changed from the unifying, monistic and narrow rationalism of his younger years to a more pluralistic and tolerant direction. Questions about colonialism, ecology and peaceful future for mankind (or the human species) took on an important role in his intellectual work.

Frosterus' work is a new case in historical studies of European modernism. However, many of the main theses of postmodern criticism seem to fit his writings, too. Should this be accounted as a merit of postmodern discourse or a demerit of Frosterus' originality?

Frosterus' ideas of the modern, especially in the early years of the 20th century, were dogmatically rational, scientific and masculine, partly comparable to the writings of Henry van de Velde, Otto Wagner, H.G. Wells, Jean Marie Guyau, Adolf Loos and Frank Lloyd Wright. But, even in those days, Frosterus' thinking was not simply universalising, linear or even progressive. Frosterus convincingly argued that the basic ideas of the modern were universal intellectual property, but the way they were implemented in different parts of the world and in different traditions formed a rich variety of modern culture. So he already had some seeds of plurality right from the beginning.

As to linear and progressive attitudes in Frosterus' thinking, ideas of evolution were crucial, but he seldom emphasised hierarchical differences between cultural innovations. According to him, a column in an Antique temple and a gun barrel in a modern battleship were analogous structures of weight and thrust, in which form and technology were

functionally balanced. For Frosterus they were finished forms of cultural evolution, rather than more-or-less developed artefacts.

The idea of the autonomy of the arts was central to Frosterus' theory of the modern. In Scandinavia he was one of first writers to formulate the ideal of pure painting as a principle of analytical self-determination, referring to the theories of Konrad Fiedler, Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

Frosterus' bold intellectual individualism and elitism, accompanied by macho rhetoric, plus repression and fear of the feminine dimensions of culture, would be an easy target for deconstruction and feminist criticism. He practically deconstructs himself. This ethos of 'aristocratic radicalism' was a modification of the Nietzschean worldview of Georg Brandes, a well-known Danish writer.

On the other hand, in our time of feminism, deconstruction and democracy – especially in the Nordic countries – one can find it refreshing to read Frosterus' elitist texts. I think Frosterus, like many of his generation, understood better than we do the challenge of intellectual responsibility and ambition. In the declarations of aristocratic radicalism, the social role of talent, too, was expressed naïvely, but without hesitation. According to Brandes, the main task of society was to produce men of genius. Sooner or later, he believed, they will repay the sacrifices.

The rational clarity of Frosterus' writing, if one forgets its background, easily gives a limited image of his work. To understand the drama and its intellectual extremes one must see behind the text. Frosterus' work was polyphonic, and the contrast to its clarity was the long shadow of decadence. His rigorous rationalism expressed his urge to get rid of the ballast of the 19th century, of symbolism, of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, of decorative design and architecture. In this context his analytical mind, logical reasoning and cynical provocations get flesh on the bones, and his acute definitions of the autonomy of painting and his passionate interest in developing a scientific theory of colour in painting show up in a complex light. Decadence, the shadow of his rationalism, makes this understandable.

What I have said chiefly concerns Frosterus' work before the end of the First World War. Later, he was obliged to accept many of the values and attitudes that he had repressed and tried to sweep under the carpet. He faced his own shadow and reevaluated his relationship to

the heritage of decadence. Oswald Spengler's critical work helped him in this process. The perspective of the decline of western civilization gave him both a means of criticism and a sense of relativity.

In Frosterus' oeuvre there are two modernisms, a monistic phase and a pluralistic one, the turning point being the First World War. He never gave up his rationalism, but broadened and deepened it. One can also say that Frosterus' thinking and design developed from the modern in a postmodern direction. His case was supposedly not unique. This aspect I consider important in the analysis of the postmodern discourse of our days. What does it tell us about the cycles of modernism of the 20th century?

Sometimes, it is more illuminating to look at the shadow than at the illuminated object itself. This method can be useful in studying contemporary postmodern discourse, too, which seems to have lost a lot of the creative energy of its heyday of the 1980s, when it was still an uncontrolled shadow of the modern. Today postmodern(ism) forms a harmless, if not meaningless, mainstream in western cultures. It has been too long in the spotlights of discursive attention, and paradoxically become blurred. Maybe now we are at the turning point, where the shadow of the postmodern points in the direction that is to be paid greater attention.

What might we see there? After all the postmodern scepticism, a need for the constructive has arisen, an interest in a stronger individuality less dependent on contemporary currents. And where have we lost the utopian dimension in our thinking, the courage to dream about the future? After all this complexity, something simple and direct could conquer our hearts like love does. Feminism in art has long been an innovative and important stream, but today it too suffers from repetition. Maybe a new understanding of the masculine values on our culture would bring a change of air.