Hubs of Modernism
Paris, Berlin, Munich and Zürich 1880-1930

Cities have always had a great attraction to people for different reasons, and can be described in a number of different metaphors; as stage, as canvas, as cat walk or as a hideaway. Many public places are even designed for these specific purposes: Champs Elysée in Paris and Unter den Linden in Berlin are two examples of the cat walk metaphor. And writers, painters, sculptures, dancers and composers have clustered in cities to make use of this public space and to perform their comments on modernity. The result became much larger than the sum of the components, or to put it differently, out of a quantity came a whole new quality.

Modernity has its most powerful manifestation and symbol in the City – this ‘hub’ of stored goods and ideas. The very definition of the modern city is concentration; concentration of goods, opportunities, people, and ideas. In contemporary social geography and economy the word ‘hub’, or node, is used to illustrate this concentration in motion.

“The successful cities of our time are products of a combination of technology, a way of organizing labour, the integration of the financial world, and, not least, the dynamics of social communications. […] The nodes in institutional networks attract each other. […] Cities represent the dense environment that throughout history have provided meeting-places, crucial to renewal and artistic creativity.”
(Jönsson et al, 2003, p. 157.)

What it describes is the attractions and possibilities for a specific place, at a specific time, to act as the centre for storage and distribution of goods, as well as cultural endeavours. It is also my belief that this concentration of modernist culture mainly took place in Central and North-Western Europe for a number of specific reasons. To illustrate this hypothesis, the focus is set on Paris, Berlin, Munich and Zürich during the decades around the turn of the century 18/1900. These cities will be contrasted to London and New York, metropolitan areas with the same potential, but apparently without the powers of avant-garde attractions. And, finally, I am going to let the trajectory of one specific individual – Frieda Uhl – act as the centre figure of the modernist network.

Writing, composing or painting, are in many ways the loneliest of professions. This view is mostly a remnant from the romantic picture of the genius in his ivory tower, the uninterested observer looking at the world from the outside, needing no one. The modernists thought – and acted – differently. Still, we have a paradox; why would these ‘lone rangers’, or supreme individualists, cluster up in communitarian settings?

Another paradox has to do with modernism itself, and it’s relation to modernity. Modernism has in itself a number of definitions. Some handbooks and encyclopaedias trace it back to the 16th century split of Christianity between Catholics and Protestants and its cultural implications; some choose the 17th century and “La querelle les anciens et les modern” as the starting point, while others use the date 1857 when Baudelaire’s Les Fleur du Mal was first published. A more useful definition, delivered by the Danish professor Pil Dahlerup, focuses less on specific events and more on the actual content of the matter and says that “Modernity is a timeless approach. The modern breakthrough is a historically concrete example of modernity (…). Modernism is one of many artistic expressions of the modernity created by “the modern breakthrough”. (Dahlerup, 1991, p. 31) Whichever definition we choose to use,
the fact is that the modernist tale has developed its own genesis and history, where the common denominators are built on reactions to modern society. We can not think modernism without modernity, nor can we think modernity without modernism. And still they are, and must be, at odds with each other. This is what shapes the dynamics.

Therefore, the modernists’ task was to use the urban symbols, to tame the anguish of modernity (Simmel, 2005, pp. 23-31) and meet the new demands. And it was (and always is) the task for an avant-garde to clear the way. But to do so, three things were important; firstly, individuals willing to act as provocateurs in these outskirts of the cultural field, described as “the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.” (P. Bourdieu, 1993, p.78); secondly, an audience willing to accept the new ideas and aesthetics and to recognise them as avant-garde (Bürger, 1984); and a civil society allowing them to create their own community (Toennies, 2001).

But, to put this at work, four things were required by and from the potential participants; means of transport, language skills, a willingness to migrate and access to cultural networks. This means that in order to succeed in this international setting of the cultural field\(^1\) the ability to communicate in more than one language was of utmost necessity. The same must be said about the access to cultural networks. The case of migration is a bit more complex and, although the route was similar, has little to do with the culture travels of the romantic era.

Basically, we may talk about three different forms of migration, where the first one is the cross-country migration that takes place within politically defined borders, from smaller towns or rural areas to the big cities. For these migrants, the access to the networks is more important than language skills. The second one is the cross-border migration, where language skills may – at an initial stage - take precedence over the access to networks, and even be the very fundamental condition for a connection to such networks and, through them, the reach for a potential audience. Both these types of migration evidently rely on working transport systems. By the third form of migration – a migration of the mind – I mean those intellectuals and artists who changed their values and/or way of thinking in their encounter with modernity and its artistic reflections. This inner ‘migration of the mind’ can be understood as the counterpoint to what has been described as the ‘inner exile’ of some war time authors and intellectuals, who remained true to their values and morals in opposition to the demands of civil society.

Who where then these individuals to become modernist provokers and who created this European cross-border movement? And why did most of it take place in Paris, Berlin and Zürich?

To answer these questions, we need to look at the push and pull factors, linked to freedoms and restrictions of the civil society.

Push factors:

1. sense of outsider position in the cultural field – locally or nationally
2. limited or lacking audience

\(^1\) Bourdieu exclusively talks about national oriented cultural fields. But his description does not contain any theoretical elements which can not be applied to any cultural field, regardless of magnitude.
3. restricting community (censorship, laws, religion and private or public demands)
4. war

Pull factors:

1. working infrastructure in the cultural field
2. virtual large audiences
3. freedom from societal restrictions
4. “otherness”

However, these factors are too general to give any clue to the reasons for Berlin, Paris and Zürich to become the centres for the modernist movement. The push factors are fairly stable entities, and only provide a number of reasons for cultural migration in general. The pull factors, on the other hand, are significant, but not only for the cities in focus here. They describe in fact conditions that would be expected from any city of a certain magnitude. Therefore; why Paris, Berlin and, perhaps more astonishing, Zürich? And why not London and New York?

Cities tend to achieve certain reputations. People tend to give remarks like ‘the author (or artist, painter etc) presently lives and works in Paris (or Berlin, New York etc)’. Such remarks are probably supposed to evoke a certain atmosphere of being in touch with modernity and specific traditions. This represents what I would like to call the symbolic value of the city. A symbolic value (or capital) according to Pierre Bourdieu is “capital – in whatever form – insofar as it is represented, i.e., apprehended symbolically, in a relationship of knowledge or, more precisely, of misrecognition and recognition, presupposes the intervention of the habitus, as a socially constituted cognitive capacity.” (Bourdieu, 1986) In effect, this means that the mere fact of belonging to a specific surrounding adds a certain social and/or cultural capital to the pull factors mentioned above.

Paris and Berlin had (and still have) a number of things in common; both of them are capital cities of nations subjected to revolutions, and both had a historically well developed cultural field, with galleries, theatres, concert halls, publishing houses and printing industries. Berlin also has its literary cabarets, where Paris has its parlour culture. And, last but not least, a vivid and unrestricted night-life connected with sexuality, drugs and alcohol. These cities came to symbolise freedom and an ‘otherness’ or novelty, and became a safe haven for modern individuals, suppressed by restrictions on expressions concerning gender, sexuality, religion, etc. In a letter to her friend Natalie Barney, the novelist Djuna Barnes writes “I hate America & feel doomed” (in Wells-Lynn, 2005). Djuna Barnes, lesbian writer and journalist, was one of a large number of British and American female intellectuals who settled in Paris in the early 20th century. Although the extract from the letter is short, the rest of the article from which it’s quoted offers a number of possible interpretations concerning working women in the cultural field. Women, in the late 1800’s, had access to education, but not necessarily to the intellectual labour market. Educated women basically had two impossible choices; getting married, and subordinate to the role as wife and mother, or attach themselves to the homosexual (lesbian) community. Frida Uhl settled for the former, Djuna Barnes the latter.

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2 Sylvia Beech, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Mina Loy and Radclyffe Hall are some other members of this Parisian group of Anglo-Americans.
Zürich is quite a different story. The pull factors were not more outstanding than for any larger city anywhere. But the main push factor was the harsher. World War I brought restrictions to societies that left no room for rebellious or experimental culture expressions. Zürich, the largest city in Switzerland, became a hub of cultural production out of the necessary need for a safe place, a refuge from guns and armies, more than anything else.

There is one more thing that the three cities above have in common; language and geography. It must be remembered that French and German were the main languages mastered by the European intellectuals until 1945, when the English language started to take the lead as the common language among internationally oriented people. The geographical location made these cities easily accessible by road or train. It was easy to travel to, from and between them. New York, as contrast, could in those days only be reached by long and expensive ship journeys.

The individuals in centre of attention here, despite of their many differences, have a number of things in common. All of them had lingual skills in French and German; they were all migrants with access to cultural networks; they came from an educated, mainly catholic, middle-class upbringing, and had spent most of their adolescence in international settings.

The ‘family tree’ of the expressionist era exhibit a group of artists connected in youth, they all obtained their reputation before the age of 30; in rebellion, and values. They all were involved in a number of social experiments and all spoke in favour of free love and women’s rights, even though while enjoying the first, they seem to have had great problems with the latter. Most of them also shared the experience of prosecution and censorship. The majority came from the theatre and art circles, and here it’s necessary to make a small detour to Munich – the ‘kindergarten’ of expressionism. And it was also in Munich Frida Uhl started her career as critic and literary ‘promoter’ in 1892, a career that soon took her to Berlin, Paris, London and New York. Wherever modernist expressions appeared, Frida had already been there, and in some cases even prepared the market for its entrance.

A brief chronology might illustrate the modernist networking, and the trajectories involved.

Frida Uhl³, born in Vienna 1872 as the daughter of an influential theatre critic and newspaper man, was educated in convent schools in Paris (1885?-1889) and London (1889-1892) where she laid the foundation as a European intellectual, by learning languages and experiencing mobility. After finishing school she soon started her own career as critic and journalist with quite some help from her father’s network. In 1892 she was placed in Munich, where she was supposed to cover the theatre stage for her father’s newspaper. Munich did very rapidly become a too restricted place for the young woman, who only months later took off to Berlin, out of reach from her father’s observant eyes, even if she was still on his pay-roll. In January 1893, one of those life-changing meetings or serependities that occurs more frequent in cities than elsewhere took place. Frida Uhl met August Strindberg, front figure of the modern breakthrough, and their meeting was of mutual gain. Strindberg could provide male protection and artistic reputation, while Frida Uhl had access to the local cultural field. Together they made a rich couple, in terms of symbolic cultural capital. Privately and emotionally they were heading for bankruptcy.

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³ All facts about Frida Uhl’s life refer to the Swedish translation of M. Strauss, Cruel Banquet. The Life and Loves of Frida Strindberg.
Frida Uhl and August Strindberg got married in 1893, and their daughter Kerstin was born in May 1894. After leaving the baby with Frida’s mother, they spent the upcoming year moving around to Berlin, Vienna, Dornach and London. In August 1894, Strindberg settled in Paris where he was joined by Frida later that autumn. Here she was first introduced to Frank Wedekind, a Swiss-German dramatist famous for his sexually provoking plays, and the man who was to become the father of her second child.

In winter 1896 Frida Uhl went to Berlin together with Wedekind to promote his career. Once again Frida’s cultural capital seems to have been the main driving force behind this liaison (Strauss, 2001, pp. 132-133), and this time her capital had increased. She was no longer only the daughter of Friedrich Uhl; she was also the wife of August Strindberg. (Their divorce did not come through until 1897.) Expectations were high, the result disappointing. When the 19th century came to its end, Frida Uhl and Frank Wedekind – separately – were back in Munich. They were no longer a couple, although linked together by their son Max, born 1897, but both of them had links to the magazine *Simplissimus*, an important voice for expressionist art and literature.

Thanks’ to *Simplissimus*, and a vivid theatre stage, Munich became the centre of modernism at the turn of the century. There the art group *Bläue Reiter*, with Hans Arp and Vassily Kandinsky among the members, was formed in 1912. And here was also the *Kammerspieltheater*, one of Europe’s more important scenes for expressionist drama, where, among others, Frank Wedekind found a stage for his play *Franziska*. (Ball, 1984, pp 425-429.) Its manager and director 1912-14 was a young man by the name Hugo Ball, who was later to become the front figure of the dada movement.

When all this took place, Frida Uhl had done her part as modernist promoter. Based on her knowledge about the artistic cabaret *Chat Noir* in Paris, visited both by Strindberg and Wedekind (Strauss, 2001, p. 147), she set forth to engage herself in a similar project in Berlin together with Donald Wedekind (brother of Frank) and Ernst von Wolzogen. The result was *Buntes Theater*, which opened in January 1901, luckily with a scandal. The cabaret form quickly became very popular, and at the end of 1901, the city of Berlin had received over forty permit applications for such cabarets. (Strauss, 2001, p. 148.)

Inspired by the success in Berlin, which actually was more a success of form than *Buntes Theater* itself, and a need to flee from her turbulent private life in Vienna and Berlin, Frida, like many times before, took her refuge to London 1908. Here she met a cultural surrounding of “[A]rtists and authors, who rebelled against years of Victorian limitations, accompanied by enterprising foreigners and exile Englishmen, returning back from other countries with new ideas.” (Strauss, 201, p. 180. My transl.) These new inputs paved the way for the entrance of the continental cabaret on British soil, and Frida Uhl, with her experience and connections, started out to fulfil this need for the Londoners. Together with the Norwegian cabaret artist Bokken Lasson, a friend from the early Berlin and Paris days, and the painters Wyndham Lewis, Spencer Gore and Charles Ginner, all three influenced by French modernism, she opened *The Cave of the Golden Calf*, close to Regent Street, in June 1912. Through the cabaret she also became acquainted with the authors Ezra Pound and Ford Maddox Ford and the Italian futurist Marinetti. In 1914 the cabaret went bankrupt, and Frida Uhl went west to New York.

Meanwhile on the European continent, the cabaret culture, as well as expressionist art and literature developed and flourished. But soon, repression would set in. The outbreak of World
War I, 1914, sent millions of people on the run. One place which could offer a peaceful asylum was the neutral Switzerland, where many of Europe’s artists and intellectuals gathered during the war, and among them, the expressionists from Munich and Berlin. Cut away from their familiar cultural settings, an ‘exile’ scene was established which gave birth to the Dadaist movement, with Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings and Tristan Tzara in the centre. ‘Cabaret Voltaire’ in Spiegelgasse 1 soon became the leading place for poets, painters, dancers and musicians from all over Europe. (Ball, 1988, pp 432-440; Ball, 1992, pp. 79-166.) And after the war, these people continued to maintain their networks and thereby spreading and transforming the message westwards; to Paris, where Tzara became involved in the Surrealist movement; London, whose art scene, with help from the foreigners Frida Uhl and Ezra Pound, opened up to the continental modernism, and their own exiles like Oscar Wilde and James Joyce; New York, finally, received dadaist artist’s like Man Ray and Marcel Duchamps, who had a strong influence, not only on their contemporaries, but also on American – and European – pop art in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

In the beginning of this presentation, the question ‘Why not London and New York?’ was raised. The answer, in addition to what have been said above, could be that apart from their geographical location, and limitations in language skills, these cities’ symbolic capital is of a different kind. London was most of all known as an economic and administrative metropolis, which also shows in the way their cultural and intellectual fields are closely linked to politics and civil service. The restrictions of the Victorian era are equally important. This was a strong civil society with no room for spontaneously created communities opposed to tradition.

New York was a metropolis in economics and business life, more than an art scene. Also, the connection between United States and Europe was still very much a question of emigration and its causes. United States was also still a fairly new state federation, whose modernity did not conceive any domestic modernism hundred years ago. This was a nation with strong community structures based on traditions, within a civil society still in the making. Instead the American modernists had to come to Europe for inspiration, artistic exchange and development.

It might look like one of history’s ironies when we today look for novelty in art in London or New York, only to find that most of the time we get refined remnants of the modernism Europe once created and exported.

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