

Class 10: Yesterday's Modernists

A. Four Timelines

1. Class title 1 (Works by each of today's artists)
2. Section title A (Four Timelines)

I must admit that I chose the images on the title slide because they looked well together. But in fact it shows one radical earlyish work (Maxwell Davies), two relatively middleish ones (Bacon and Eliot), and one rather late work (Moore). And it gives no idea of what these artists did before or after these works, their artistic trajectory in effect

3. Photos of the artists above

As for the artists themselves, I originally chose them just to have something to put on the website, but I have decided to stick with them nonetheless. All four are British artists—even **TS Eliot** (1888–1965), who was born in the US, but became a British citizen in 1927, and a pillar of the Anglican Church, what's more. Each of these four was a name to conjure with in my undergraduate days or shortly after; they were people you talked about to claim a place among the *cognoscenti*. However. I must also admit that I have not read an Eliot poem for some time, except when preparing a class; I no longer get excited by **Henry Moore** (1898–1986), the later works of **Francis Bacon** (1909–92) leave me cold, and I know relatively little of the later work of **Peter Maxwell Davies** (1934–2016), although he was an electric figure at one corner of my professional world when I was starting out. So the question I expected to address in the class was going to be: *What happens to ground-breaking modernists when they are no longer the latest thing?* I expected to find that some would become less radical and more popular, while others simply faded out. There may be some truth in that—but looking at it further, I find that each one is different. I cannot come up with some grand theory, and perhaps it's better that way.

4. Timelines of the four artists

Here are the timelines for all four. Each produced a breakthrough work in his earlier thirties which established them as people to watch. The person who most neatly fits my radical-to-populist paradigm is **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies**, who left the London arts scene in 1971 and moved to the Orkney Islands in the far north of Scotland. While it would be wrong to say that his later music was anything but well-crafted, he became more and more immersed in his local scene as opposed to the international *avant garde*. **TS Eliot** did not produce anything as challenging as *The Waste Land* (1922) in later years, and indeed became better known for his children's collection *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (source of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical) and his plays for the West End Stage, but *Four Quartets* came out in 1945, a long and difficult poem that many consider his masterpiece. He is the only one of the four who has not remained a name to conjure with after his death, though *Cats* must have helped. **Henry Moore's**

style evolved continuously, but it would be hard to classify it as less or more approachable. He remained a major master until the year he died, and by then he had put most of his considerable wealth into the Henry Moore Foundation, to preserve the continuity of his own legacy and support younger artists.

Francis Bacon also lived through a continuous development in his art, which became, if anything, even more personal and idiosyncratic; and judging by auction figures, he does not seem to have become any less successful after his death.

5. Bacon, with thumbnails of the other three

There is one curious point that I want to mention. Eliot, Moore, and Maxwell Davies were all outsiders, born in America or the industrial north of England. All ended up very much as establishment figures, winning the highest honors. Bacon, who was actually born into an establishment family, spent his entire life rebelling against it, living on the seedy edge of the London criminal underworld. Go figure.

B. Eliot's Epiphanies

6. Section title B (from *Four Quartets*)

Let us hear the opening of the title poem in Eliot's first published collection, *The Love Song of Alfred J Prufrock*. The reader, *Roscius*, is pseudonymous, but I do like both his delivery and his brooding video.

7. Eliot: *The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock*, opening

8. — text of the above

What do you think of the style and imagery of this? Eliot published it in 1917, but he came over to England in 1914, on a scholarship to Oxford, so I assume the urban images are based on London, which they certainly fit better than anywhere in the US. But there is also the intrusion of an altogether higher register: the quotation from Dante at the start, the women "talking of Michelangelo," very improbable in London's East End. It is a poem about **atmosphere**, about **identity**, and about **time**: all things that we shall see again in his later work.

9. Some early dates in Eliot's life

Eliot's most advanced poem, the most influential, the most difficult to understand, was *The Waste Land*, published in 1922. It represents a total dissolution of order and stability, both in the world at large, following the First World War, and in Eliot's own life, uprooted from his birthplace, self-trapped in a loveless marriage to a mentally unstable woman, and fighting severe depression himself. Here is what he wrote, years later.

10. Eliot describing his marriage

As for *The Waste Land* itself, I will play two clips. In the first, an English professor, **Oliver Tearle**, summarizes the theme of the poem with some well-chosen images. In the second, actress **Fiona Shaw**

performs the complete opening section of the poem, *The Burial of the Dead*, in an empty room in Dublin. She manages to make the text sound almost normal; the one criticism I have is that she sings the two quotations from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* to a made-up tune, not the music Wagner wrote.

11. Oliver Tearle on *The Waste Land*

12. Fiona Shaw reads the first section of *The Waste Land*

13. Eliot: *Four Quartets*, first edition

Eliot once wrote to fellow-poet Stephen Spender, "I wish that I could obtain in poetry the same kind of suffering as Beethoven expresses in his last Quartets." Well, he more or less achieved this in what was to be his last great work of abstract verse, his monumental *Four Quartets* (1945). In other courses, I have used a version of the first three minutes of it illustrated by evocative video images; I will put it on the website. But even though it involves another actor, I am going to show you instead the start of a stage performance by **Ralph Fiennes**, because he understands that turning Eliot's words into mere gesture can spark the imagination, while pictures, however poetic, coopts it.

14. Eliot: *Four Quartets*, opening (Ralph Fiennes)

15. Eliot: *Old Possum* and *Collected Plays*

After *Four Quartets*, Eliot put most of his energy into a series of stage plays. Actually, he had started even earlier, with *Murder in the Cathedral*, which dates from 1935. He also had a lighter side; *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was published in 1939. We all know what Andrew Lloyd Webber would do with the material in his musical *Cats* (1981), but instead I'll play you a snatch from a 1954 setting by **Alan Rawsthorne** (1905–71) for speaker and orchestra.

16. Rawsthorne: *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, "Jellicle Cats"

17. Eliot memorial in Westminster Abbey

Eliot died in 1965, the recipient of Britain's highest award for intellectual achievement, the **Order of Merit**, and the winner of the **Nobel Prize in Poetry**. His popularity, however, declined after his death, perhaps due to being perceived too much as an authoritarian, establishment figure, perhaps due to his anti-Semitism. It took the success of *Cats*, I think, to revive it.

C. Anatomical Abstractions

18. Section title C

Those images came from a **Henry Moore** retrospective from 1960. The point I was hoping to make is that, even though he did some things that were pretty much abstract, almost all his work had some **connection to the human form**, or at the very least bones in the human body. Actually, this is true of all four artists today: **Eliot** interlaced his formal innovations with scenes from everyday life; however extreme **Bacon** got, all his work was based on the human body; and even his most *avant-garde* days,

Maxwell Davies wrote works centered around people; or to put it another way, the more abstract his work got—symphonies, concertos, or whatever—the more approachable it became for the ordinary listener. So this entire class is devoted to variations on human lives.

19. Castleford, Yorkshire, birthplace of Henry Moore (right)

Moore, as I said, came from anything but a fine-art community. He was born in **Castleford**, a mining town in Northern England, and from there won scholarships first to Leeds and then London. I'll illustrate the rest of this hour with clips from a 10-minute video with **Geoffrey Worsdale** of the Henry Moore Foundation. I'll put the whole thing on the website, but now I'll show shorter clips out of sequence.

20. HENI talk: Moore's early years

21. Moore: *Reclining Woman* (1930, Ottawa), with *Chac Mool* inspiration

The video moves in a rather different direction, but one of the ancient sculptures that made a big impression on Moore was the **Mayan** votive image known as the **Chac Mool**. Some of his first works, such as the one from 1930 you see here, were clearly based on this source. His sculpture was executed in **Green Hornton Stone**, which Moore liked because, unlike marble, it didn't look new when finished, but as though it has been around for a long time.

22. Moore: *Draped Reclining Woman* (1958, Stuttgart), *Reclining Figure* (1970, Tel Aviv)

Here are two later variants on that same idea. Would you care to compare them? One is fairly literal, even down to the relative reality of the drapery; the other, though still recognizable, is a lot more abstract. A lot of Moore's work between the Wars was indeed abstract, influenced by his European contemporaries. But then two things changed: he became well-known for his work depicting Londoners taking shelter in tube stations during the Blitz; and he moved to the country and became a father. Back to Geoffrey Worsdale to explain both.

23. HENI talk: abstraction, figuration, family

24. Three works of the 1960s

What do you make of the top sculpture here? It is still derivative of the Chac Mool figure, isn't it? But by broken up into three distinct elements, it also makes one think of vertebrae or other bones. Moore's work generally gets more abstract towards the end of his life. But three things prevent him from losing touch entirely with the natural world.

25. Moore in his studio

Point Number One is his reliance for inspiration on natural objects that he finds on his walks. These can be animal bones, random pieces of wood, or interestingly-shaped stones. So no matter how abstract, you always feel that Moore's work has its roots in nature. Here is Geoffrey Worsdale and then Moore himself describing the process.

26. HENI talk: use of natural objects

27. Moore: *The Arch* (1969, Schwäbisch Hall)

Worsdale commented that *The Arch* makes you think of bones. But to me, the human association is more obvious than that: it reminds me absolutely of a couple embracing. Note that this is exhibited out of doors—in this case, in Germany. Which brings me to **Points Two and Three**. Moore always preferred his work to be seen in a natural environment, and he put almost all his considerable later wealth into creating a Foundation that would make this possible, by creating a park at the simple cottage he rented at Perry Green, in Hertfordshire, and by supporting the work of younger sculptors. Here is the Director of the Henry Moore Foundation one last time.

28. HENI talk: Perry Green

29. Class title 2 (Hepworth and Caro)

The course is called “Popularity... and then?” What are the “and thens” with Henry Moore? He ensured the survival of his own art by creating the Foundation. And he passed on the torch by leaving a legacy to support others. At the same time, I don’t think his star is as high as it once was. I suspect the reason is much the same as for TS Eliot: in retrospect, he just seems too magisterial. I asked my cousin, who lives close to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where many of Moore’s works are shown. But the big attraction there, she says, is not Moore but his friend from their days at the Leeds College of Art, fellow Yorkshire sculptor **Dame Barbara Hepworth** (1903–75), whose work is that much more elegant. Or maybe the natural forms thing has run its course; the standout British sculptor of the next generation was **Sir Anthony Caro** (1924–2013), Moore’s former assistant, who struggled to get out of his shadow by inventing a language that is not natural at all, but bright, clean-cut, and obviously man-made.

D. Dissolves on the Canvas

30. Section Title D

31. Bacon: *Portrait of a Man with Glasses III* (1963)

I thought of calling this section “Oral Obsession,” but thought better of it! That was an expert from Christie’s in London last year, promoting *Portrait of a Man with Glasses III*, a 1963 painting by **Francis Bacon** (1909–92). It went for \$8.5 million, so in terms of the prices he is able to command, the artist is indeed popular. What do you think of it?

32. Bacon’s *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969)

That \$8.5 million was by no means the highest price paid for a Bacon painting. The artist preferred to work in triptychs, or sets of three, and one of these, *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969), sold at Christie’s for \$142.5 million in 2013, making it the most expensive painting ever sold at the time. Goodness knows what such a work would cost if it came into the market now. Let’s look at the first of these triptychs, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1945, Tate), which launched the then-36-year-old Bacon into the public consciousness. This is the opening of a 2017 BBC film by director **Richard Curson Smith**, appropriately called *Francis Bacon: a Brush with Violence*.

33. Richard Curson Smith: *Francis Bacon: a Brush with Violence*, opening
34. Bacon: *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1945, Tate)

“What Bacon did was something different,” says the narrator. What do you think it was? The critic **John Russell** observed that “there was painting in England before the *Three Studies*, and painting after them, and no one [...] can confuse the two.” So who was this Francis Bacon? The opening of another video, *The Scandalous Life and Horrifying Paintings of a Genius*, gives us a brief biography. For some reason, the script has been given to some robotic narrator who speaks too fast and without feeling, but it is a good script nonetheless.

35. *The Scandalous Life and Horrifying Paintings of a Genius*, opening
36. Bacon: *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953, Des Moines)

Bacon painted similar subjects over and over, with the same obsessive concern for squeezing every possible variation out of a single motif as **Monet** with his cathedrals or haystacks. One of the most persistent of these was his so-called **Screaming Popes** series, which he began in 1953. The Pope image came from a reproduction of the *Portrait of Innocent X* (1650) by **Diego Velázquez** (1599–1660). The screaming face was a still from **Sergei Eisenstein’s** silent film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The idea of putting them together and the resulting existential *Angst* is all Bacon. Here is another video attempting to explain it.

37. Video: *Bacon’s Screaming Popes*, ending
38. Portraits by Lucian Freud

This is a portrait of Bacon by his friend (at least at the time) **Lucian Freud** (1922–2011), together with one of his self-portraits. I’ll explain why I am showing it in a moment. Eliot and Moore, and absolutely Peter Maxwell Davies, as we shall see, fall into a pattern of once-radical artists mellowing in later years. Bacon absolutely does not. What does change is his subject-matter. The “public” subjects like the Popes gradually get replaced by portraits, of his friends, his various same-sex lovers, and himself. More personal, for sure—but that does not mean any easier on the eye. Look at what he did with Freud and his own self-portrait:

39. Portraits by Francis Bacon

You heard Bacon’s speaking voice in a previous video. It is soft-spoken, upper-middle-class, RP English. He fits entirely into the establishment world that his birth and subsequent renown entitles him to. But that is just a mask. His private life was spent in night-clubs and gambling joints. He was drawn like a moth to the fringes of the criminal world, to violence, and to sado-masochistic homosexual encounters.

40. Francis Bacon with lover George Dyer

Here he is with **George Dyer**, his lover and companion for most of the Sixties, and a petty criminal. The rumor is that Bacon met Dyer while he was attempting to burgle his flat. It is not true, but is too good a story for film-makers not to latch on to, as in the 1998 film *Love Is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon*. Here is the trailer. **Derek Jacobi** and **Daniel Craig** play Bacon and Dyer.

41. Film: *Love is the Devil*, trailer

42. Francis Bacon: the third of the so-called *Black Triptychs* (1973)

For much of the Sixties, Bacon painted Dyer obsessively. Dyer, who did not understand or like the paintings (though he liked the money they brought), felt increasingly displaced by them. In 1971, Dyer followed Bacon to Paris, where he was being honored with a big retrospective exhibition. On the night before the opening, he killed himself in his hotel room with a combination of barbiturates and alcohol. Bacon discovered his body the next day, but persuaded the management to hush it up for two days while he played out his establishment persona as the suave artist. It was a convenient mask behind which he could hide his feelings. But was the gangster side a mask also? Could Bacon ever come to terms with his true feelings? Probably not, but he did paint a number of works over the next few years that brooded on the theme of death, among them three so-called *Black Triptychs* that referenced Dyer quite directly. They sold, of course, for tens of millions. But can we ever really know the man who painted them?

E. Max Moves North

43. Section title E

When I was beginning my career as an opera director in London, **Peter Maxwell Davies** (Max, as he was known) was the reigning monarch of the *avant garde*. My contacts with him were peripheral: I assisted on an opera production with his ensemble, *The Fires of London*; I wrote a libretto for his assistant at the time; and I went to most of his premieres. The music with which my video started, *Antechrist* (1967), comes from this period.

44. Max in the Orkneys

In 1966, Max visited the wild **Orkney Islands** to the North of Scotland, liked it, and lived up there for the rest of his life. It would be simplistic to claim that his music changed at this point; many of his more radical works were composed in the islands. But it is true that the setting gradually transformed him. His later music seems to have a natural inspiration rather than an urban one, and many of his more popular works are based on Orcadian folk melodies. My cousin, who was visiting at the time I was preparing this class, and is not particularly into music, was able to sing the tune of his most popular piece, *Farewell to Stromness*, from memory. Apparently it is played at weddings and funerals just about as often as Pachelbel's *Canon*. So in this respect Maxwell Davies followed a very similar trajectory to that of **Aaron Copland** in this country: making his name as a firebrand radical, but achieving true popularity later with works that somehow tapped into the natural harmonies of his country. Let's listen to *Farewell to Stromness* with a rather good video I found on YouTube. Here is the beginning and ending.

45. Maxwell Davies: *Farewell to Stromness*, video (excerpts)

46. *The Yellow Cake Revue* (1980)

The interesting thing is that Max did not write this as a pretty piece of local color, but as an interlude in a piece of political protest called *The Yellow Cake Revue* (1980), as part of concerted action to oppose Uranium mining in the Orkneys. The “Farewell” of the title is bitterly satirical: if you open a uranium mine two miles away from the Orkney capital, Stromness, you might as well say good-bye. Even writing simple music, Max was always a radical, and the music of his firebrand years was anything but simple.

47. Dudley Moore and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies

Excuse the watermarks in this rather unexpected pairing: two British icons at the height of their fame. On the left, the comedian and actor **Dudley Moore** (1935–2002) in a scene from *Arthur* in 1981. On the right, **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies**, now a knight and Master of the Queen’s Music, receiving an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University in 2009. Other than both being Brits and born around the same time, what is the connection? I found a wonderful BBC program of 1961, featuring them both as promising young composers—this was just before Dudley Moore’s breakout in *Beyond the Fringe* and all that followed. I’ll put the whole thing on the website, but here is the opening. Note especially the moment when Maxwell Davies plays a Bach prelude for his high school class, followed immediately by Moore playing the same piece as swing music in a dance hall!

48. BBC Monitor (1961): Peter Maxwell Davies and Dudley Moore

49. *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, cover

As it happens, Max could swing the classics too. Here is one of the most famous of his *avant-garde* works, *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, written in 1969. The text, by **Randolph Stow**, imagines the mad King George III, and interweaves his own sayings, quotations from Handel’s *Messiah* and others—you will hear the opening recitative transformed into a foxtrot—with his own extraordinary verse to create a surreal nightmare. The instrumentalists are all supposed to be in bird cages; the percussionist has a whip with which he flogs the mad king, who is encased in a strait-jacket. Davies wrote it for the South African performer *Roy Hart*, who had studied developed vocal techniques giving him a four-octave range. Here it is performed by **Kelvin Thomas**. Tell me what you think; is it just too far out there for you, or what?

50. Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, excerpt

51. — still from the above

52. Maxwell Davies: *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise*, cover

What did you think? It is difficult music, for sure, and at times ugly, but to my mind the dramatic context means that we are not listening to it as music, so much as the ravings of the Mad King. Let’s move forward once more to Max on Orkney. Here is the beginning and end of one of his most popular pieces, *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* (1985). The complete performance on the web is well worth watching. You will hear the composer explain about the marriage of two of his friends, the folk musicians almost losing it through drinking too much whisky (someone actually comes round in this performance at the BBC Proms and hands out glasses), and the sunrise he saw on the walk home across the island. Once more, I’m afraid, I can manage only the beginning and end.

53. Maxwell Davies: *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise*, beginning and end

54. Class title 3 (modified repeat of slide #3)