The sands of non-contemporaneous time are running out. Everybody lives, or is soon going to live, under conditions of global contemporaneity and has an undeniable right to be in the present time.

Wolf Schafer

The writing of genealogies of contemporaneity is an attempt to see the global era of “the contemporary” as part of longer temporalities; indeed, as argued via Jameson, “the contemporary” is not a concept, but a narrative category. To insist that the contemporary is incomplete might open up the future once more as something that is different from the present, which also then means adopting the more radical position that we are not contemporary now—that we have never been contemporary. The preceding analyses of the contemporary and contemporaneity can be understood in a Deleuzian fashion—that is, as problems to think with rather than as absolute propositions. We have moved all the way from the “modern promises” of a collective project using the technological developments of modernity and the most progressive social projects (roughly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards) to the distortion of such ideals in the form of the
actually-existing-Utopia of “Delirious Dubai”. It is, of course, an ironic Utopia. How will the contemporary of today be read by the alternative civilisation of the future? It seems necessary to be dissatisfied with the contemporary and to acknowledge that just because we exist now, or at the same apparent time, does not mean we are contemporaries. The United States is anything but contemporary, but it insists on trying to remake others in its own image.

We have seen that the contemporary (as an attitude of modernity) has a legitimate history in the resources of thinkers, in all of their ideological differences, from Kant’s answer to the question “What is enlightenment?” to Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and on to Wyndham Lewis, to Bloch, through to Foucault and then Jameson, Marc Augé, Wolf Schafer, and Terry Smith. This is an odd path through a long history (and, yes, full of omissions). By arcing back into the past, as far back as the European enlightenment and the era of European power, we are able to assemble versions of a contemporaneity with content, or, specifically, of a modernity. Modernity was understood then as a way of relating to the present moment, as a form of commitment to the present in order to bring about another possible world, or Utopia. Such a “project” has not been without its excesses and atrocities, as we have seen, especially in the twentieth-century. When modernity gets botched, it botches everything.

In postmodernity, we saw less a “period” than a moment in the ongoing, radically uneven, and unjust history of modernity, or of industrial and post-industrial capitalism. It did not herald a qualitatively new age, but a glimpse of realisation, a sometimes-critical coming to terms with the limits of modernity itself (which is no small deal). Postmodernity, further, was demonstrated to be not a universal project of culture, but a specifically North American phenomenon; even if it was global in its manifestations, it was still American-centric. Jameson associated it with expansion of “a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (1991: 5) externally, and a closed-in consumer culture internally, “an immense dilation of its sphere (the sphere of
Contemporaneity opens up an odd development, partly anticipated and partly a surprise. Notable in the widespread proliferation of the term “contemporary” is the severing of reference to modernity and modern times that was once so crucial to conceiving of Western civilisation’s place—its sense of self as a mere production of otherness. This might be quite simply how the contemporary functions as well. Against the concepts of the modern and the postmodern, which were seen as linked to the commitment (or not) to a project of civilisation (cruelly stamping out otherness), contemporaneity might be best characterised not as a lack that must be overcome (in a Hegelian or Heideggerian sense) but as an enigma that remains perpetually unresolved (in Mario Perniola’s sense). This suggests very different ontological and ideological makeups to the contemporary as opposed to the modern and the postmodern; the former may simply be in a period of immaturity—to be followed by something like a “proper” modernity, post-European and post-global—while the later retain their differences.

In high modernity, life was still organised into two distinct temporalities: the city and the countryside. In the contemporary, major technologies such as cyberspace—which William Gibson famously defined as a “consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation … A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity” (2001: 67)—help to obliterate temporal lagging, and remake the most rural lands in the image of the urban. The once-distinct temporalities of day and night are also eroding. These erosions have had and will continue to effect profound changes within architecture and the way we live. Indeed, a precondition for the culture of contemporaneity is that the project and its old city centres, such as Petersburg, Paris, and New York—the modernist cities named by Marshall Berman in *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (a text that is now historical and classic in its own right)—no longer have the same kind of authoritative
influence over today’s narratives of aesthetic development, temporality, and difference. (Berman specified New York for the Robert Moses project, Paris for George Eugene Haussmann’s boulevards, and Petersburg for Russia’s distorted modernisation: a flash forward to what became the late twentieth century’s so-called Third Worlds.) Further, the instituting of the contemporary appears as the final, hegemonic co-optation of the idea, well known from critical theory, that history and aesthetics have no intrinsic narrative of development of the sort that Hegel (in the nineteenth century) and, later, Martin Heidegger (in the twentieth) wanted to introduce.

My suggestion in such a situation as the potential exhaustion of both modernity and postmodernity turns on a characterisation of Perniola’s. Modernity was relatively planned and directed, postmodernity continued in critical reference to the admittedly failed plan and direction of modernity, but contemporaneity has abandoned the notion of modern life as one lived within a project centred around realising any model of a future. In fact, we generally now see such attempts at realisation, and even modelling itself, as very dangerous indeed. The enigma, as Perniola has described it, goes beyond the society of the spectacle as conceived by Guy Debord (Perniola 1995: 10–12). The society of the spectacle was characterised not by concentration as in Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany, but by diffuseness, as in that developed within the post-World War Two United States. The characterisation of the contemporary as an enigma that is not bound to be solved adds clarity and permits imagination to that otherwise contentless, massively deployed cultural category that is so unlike historical modernity. Modernity posited a lack within the present and a coming, messianic future object, and postmodernity constituted a narrative critique whose project was one of departing from the treacherous forward momentum of modernity at all cost. The great distance is the critical one: the contemporary is not, by default, a critical category, but modernity and postmodernity were.

The expansion of the New York MoMA was exemplary of a certain aspect of the contemporary cultural condition, namely,
centred around expensive and seemingly limitless extension, but in the absence of a coherent project—at least, in the absence of what modernism and postmodernism would have grasped as a coherent project (whether or not the object was to expound and promote or critique and denigrate). Yoshio Taniguchi’s expansion was held to illustrate an enigmatic condition; the contemporary, which was decadently deployed at the esteemed modernist headquarters, both exceeds the modern and includes the postmodern, but is not limited to it. By contrast, “the contemporary” is extraordinarily undisciplined; it allows the postmodern to exist alongside a fresh version of the high modern. For this reason, it feels emptied of content, contradictory, and disallowed of the modern’s critique of the commodity, which the museum promotes again at a higher level, both in the expanded shop and in the individual exhibits that elevate once-critical objects and paintings to the status almost of crown jewels. Very eerily, the new minimalism of Taniguchi speaks to the most radical of the aesthetic avant-gardes. Dada has become the institution’s financial-architectural Unconscious; in contemporaneity, Dada, once critical, has become the artistic equivalent of the architects such as Koolhaas—who proclaim an autonomy from the system of global capitalism—but are really the willing playthings of the élites.

The biggest orgies of the eternal present are to be found in architecture, where resources, people, and capital alike are all exhausted in the same mega-projects: projects that cannot sensibly be argued to be in keeping with the ethical visions of modernism, and to some critical extent, with postmodernism (which at least contained a critique of the excesses and failures of modernism as a project). The post-ethical architectural projects in the US, China, and especially the UAE, are the ultimate signs of a modernity that has lost its belief in building a relationship with the future and, in turn, a relationship to the globalised present. Its relationship is not one of long-term goals in the face of the impending disasters of the new century—the great hangovers of war and global warming that we have collectively inherited from an aggressive and imperial
modernity and two centuries of coal and oil-driven industrialism and, later, consumption—but of investment in compensatory fantasy environments and a level of luxurious living that were barely thinkable, and perhaps not desirable, within first-wave European modernity.

Dubai is particularly disturbing in the way that its architecture reveals a speed and deployment of resources on a scale unseen in modernism’s history, yet mere excess and abundance are its driving motivations in the face of a planet that is well-aware of its mass urban impoverishments (as outlined by Mike Davis) and multiple narratives of the end of oil and resources. Dubai might be an incredible archaeological find for the socialist historians of the future: the ultimate sign of the orgiastic dénouement of global capitalist civilisation in the creation of unsustainable fantasy lands for an élite that lives off virtually feudal divisions of labour.

Unlike in modernity and postmodernity, we are trained to not expect to go beyond contemporaneity. It is naturalised as the absolute of our cultural experience and as the highest form of cultural awareness that we might have. The accompanying attitudes of modernity and postmodernity gave us something to do. Koolhaas’ colleague, Sze Tsung Leong, has suggested that “in the end, there will be little else for us to do but shop” is surely a recognition of an achieved pseudo-Utopia of the present, made possible by late capitalism and the maintenance of a system that has luxury and consumption on the inside and forced labour and impoverishment on the outside (Jameson 2003: 77). The “future” undergoes a radical reduction in such a circumstance, in which power is held in the hands of a small élite, and might only henceforth be experienced in the form of an excitement about the money to be made—a short-term, selfish, and ultimately meaningless endeavour.

Within modernity, the key crisis was tradition—the broad effects of the industrial revolution and the rising and falling bourgeois classes across Europe recognised, in Marshall Berman’s phrase borrowed from *The Communist Manifesto*, that “all that was solid melted into air”, which was especially evident in the new commodity system as analysed by Marx and
later the Frankfurt School theorists. Tradition was fragmenting and being discontinued all over the place, and a new society, a faster society, an internationally aspiring system and world market was emerging in its place. Think of the vast colonial structures as much as the risk-ridden triumphs of bourgeois technology (such as the iconic RMS *Titanic*). (A contemporary equivalent might be hinted at in the form of the new safety discourses surrounding the space tourism industry—an industry awaiting a probable blow to its ideology of progress.) According to Ezra Pound, in the modernist present one found indicative objects, temporally advanced creatures that seemed to hint towards a better world: an infinitely progressing world that, through technology and, in the fine arts, the break away from convention and the rise of Abstraction (and geometry as a resource for renewing art), promised everything. It was the Enlightenment manifested finally in terms of a class that valued rationality, efficiency, progress, and the world of tomorrow over the past and tradition, which had been blown to the wind (literally, in the cases of war and revolution). Modernity was, above all—at least, before the blow to progress that was the Great War—an age of excitement, of invention, of speed, and unbelievable technological advance.

Postmodernity sought an end to the excesses of modernity;¹ it was a critical project, but not one based on realising a Utopia. The worst aspects of modernity had been revealed through then-recent European and world history. The Enlightenment, according to the famous critique by Adorno and Horkheimer, had ended in the Holocaust. Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis brought their argument to the next level when he argued in *Modernity and the Holocaust* that aspects of modernity that were valued in some parts of the world—rationalism, technology, machinic production, organisation—were as easily put to the uses of atrocity elsewhere. For Bauman, the Holocaust was congruent with the highest modern notions and

¹ Nobody likes a technocracy; the characters in the 1965 film *Alphaville* wished to escape theirs, as it were, into some imagined “post”-modernity.
used the same set of modern rationalist ideas and technical advances (such as International Business Machines) of which, elsewhere, Western societies were proud (such as in the United States).

In architecture, a similar line of argument can be drawn. The Corbusian intelligence of functionalism and mass-housing projects, of prefabrication, planning, re-zoning, and the aspiration to some ultimate condition of the machine—the individual building as a machine within the city as machine, and further, the individual human unit as a “machine man” or modular person that locked into the whole functional system—ended up as the realisation, in the worst examples, of a more concrete and perfected alienation. Modernist architects believed in an essentially “thaumaturgic” power of architecture. They acknowledged the power of architecture on the human body, and on populations, but failed to recognise its inherent violence on it. Modern architecture became, as Peter Blake suggested in *Form Follows Fiasco*, a vast Giacometti machine, producing isolated, withdrawn figures, not fully realised humans, but, as Sartre observed in his 1948 essay on the Swiss sculptor, creatures rendered forever in the distance, in a singular dimension, without middle and foregrounds, at “an absolute distance” (Sartre: 603). Pruitt-Igoe remains the ultimate example of this kind of architecturally enabled and realised state of collective folly. Today, the example can be used to project an image of the future of architecture that is dangerous and undesirable.

That was the postmodern critique, at least part of it. If modernity saw crisis in tradition, the postmoderns saw the *tradition of modernity* itself in crisis. This had to be radically revised. The artists, architects, and cultural theorists during this time of rapid turnaround of received “modern” ideas and practices provide us with the best access to the problems and their supposed solutions. The postmoderns sought a Kantian exit from the excesses of modernity, which, through the identification of what Wolf Schafer called the “modernity syndrome”, understood its product—a whole philosophy of life and progress—to be universal. This proved incredibly diffi-
cult, or even just plain wrong, especially as it justified a continuation of the colonised peoples of the world.

The postmodernists were a confluence of individuals from various generations in a moment of strong realisation in the post-war and Cold War eras who collectively sought plurality, difference, and multiplicity as high ideals, implicit critiques, and modes of radical exit from what had become the horrors of the modern universal rationality—controlled by the few. The philosophical notion of difference from the 1960s eventually saw its institutionalisation as multiculturalism in the 1990s—an ideology that might be seen to function to conceal its own internal disorders. In architecture, a wide embrace of popular vernaculars, appropriation of non-architectural forms, and a new appreciation for fun, nostalgia, and play came to offer a way out of the Modern Movement and Corbusian rule. Significantly, it was North American; Las Vegas was hailed as the Utopia of post-Modern urban life, of floating signs and a multi-directional infantilisation of the subject. (The exploitative industries of gambling and sex, it might be noted, did not enter into Venturi and Scott-Brown’s analysis, which was still operating from within a mode of architectural purism.) Bruce Bégout updates Venturi and Scott-Brown for “the contemporary” where the city is analysed as a bleak non-city prototype for current urbanity everywhere: “no man’s land, waste ground, non-place, ghost town, urban simulacrum, nowhere city, etc. For us it is Zeropolis … the degree zero city of urbanity, of architecture and culture, the degree zero city of sociability, art and ideas” (Bégout: 22).

The so-called “contemporary” paradigm is often presented, and presents itself, as offering an exit—however temporary or provisional—from the cultural framework of a rigid and authoritarian modernism (long outmoded) and a postmodernism that itself has become historical (banished to the dustbin of the 1980s and 1990s). The category of “the contemporary” does not fail, and cannot fail, unless it is reloaded with content and a destination. Alain Badiou’s complaint about contemporary art was: “It says: ‘Everything is possible’, which is also to say that nothing is” (2006: 148). Much of the aggres-
sive cultural production of the present indicates the new scale of resources (at their moment of crisis) and the mobilisation of people—whether labour forces or consumers—that have become achievable but are still directed en masse into what Adolf Loos pejoratively called the ornamental. An alternative would redirect these profound abilities to changing the very substance of a collective life that will not leap centuries ahead of itself into a brighter future, as long as it refuses the difficult path of experimenting with the dangers of planning and commitment (that need not necessarily be authoritarian), and the attempt to resolve the false sense of the eternal experienced collectively within a present that increasingly has no use for its past except as a warehouse of accumulated artefacts to be auctioned.