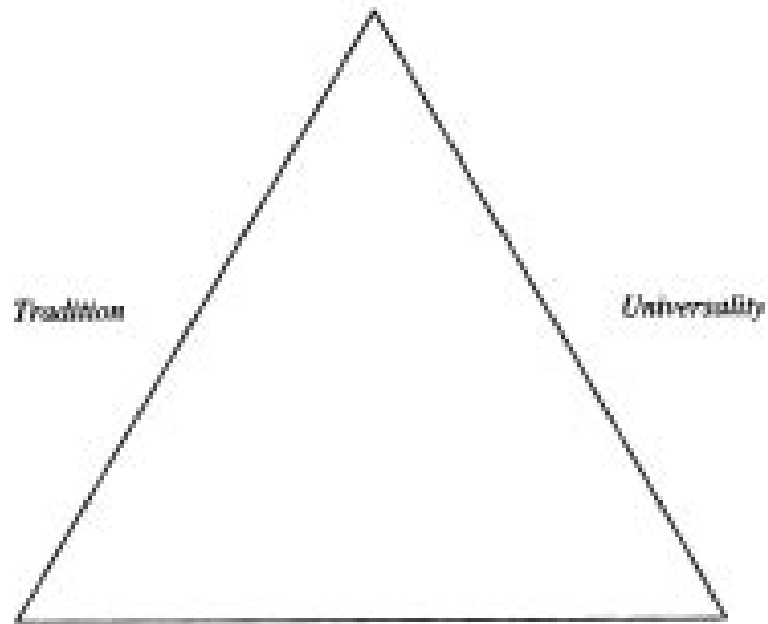


CLASSICISM



Historicism

modernism

Subjectivity

Modernity vs. tradition – or other axes?¹

Per Anders Aas

The historiography of modern architecture has focused strongly on evolution, the transition from tradition to modernity. But a bias towards novelty may overshadow other crucial issues. This is brought visibly to attention when we look at the neo-classicism of the 1920s, which may be viewed not as a stage of transition on the axis tradition/modernity, but as opposed to the entire paradigm of evolution. Thus I suggest a model that captures other axes, and also the ambiguities of some common concepts, taking its starting point in the interwar tension between three positions: romantic historicism, neo-classicism, and modernism.

The tug-of-war about classicism

The Norwegian 1920s is a decade of conflict tradition/modernity – in politics, in literature, in ethics and religion. But it is also a decade of classicism – in academic scholarship, in various fields of art, and most strikingly in architecture.² If future archaeologists were to propose a *Zeitgeist* of the twenties, classicism would be a better bid than cultural conflict.

The category of the classic may not be attributed

unambiguously to either side of the axis tradition/modernity. It would be easy to view it as an exponent of tradition, but this is a narrowing of perspective. Instead of viewing neo-classicism as a prolongation of historicism, placing the break tradition/modernity near 1930, there is now a tendency to view it as a predecessor of modernism and place the break near 1920, when neo-classicism succeeds national romanticism. The art historian Elisabeth Seip contrasts classicism to historicism rather than to modernism:

Skal vi forstå klassisismen tidlig på 1900-tallet, er det nødvendig å holde fast at det går et dypt skille mellom det sene 1800-tallets tilsynelatende klassisisme – det som tradisjonelt og nedsettende kalles stilforvirring, i dag mer nøytralt benevnt historisme – og 1920-talls klassisismen. De to uttrykksformene overlapper hverandre i tid, klassiske motiver benyttes i begge epoker, men det arkitektoniske innholdet er aldri det samme.³

Epokens syn på form – den kubistiske oppfatning – respekt for materialenes egenart og bruk av ny byggeteknikk gjør ny-klassisismen til en del av vårt århund-

res moderne arkitektur. Det går et dypt skille mellom nasjonalromantikken rundt 1905 og ny-klassisismen i 1920-årene. Derimot kan jeg ikke se et tilsvarende skille mellom ny-klassisismen og modernismen eller funksjonalismen. (...) Tvert imot er begge stilretninger internasjonalt orienterte og bygger på de samme grunnleggende arkitektoniske oppfatninger.⁴

Seip's view is convincingly supported both theoretically and by the self-understanding of Norwegian architects in the middle of the twenties.⁵ But though moving the watershed, this view maintains the focus on the binary opposition tradition/modernity. The tug-of-war about neo-classicism – whether to interpret it as prolonged historicism or preliminary modernism – reflects this binary scheme. Neo-classicism may be pulled back or forth, depending on what aspects to accent, or what perspectives to employ. The question, however, is whether the opposition tradition/modernity is the most relevant as far as crucial values are concerned.

Seip fruitfully opposes the simple linking of classicism to tradition, and thus prepares a more dynamic frame of interpretation. So instead of taking part in a tug-of-war about the temporal affinities of classicism, I will question the fruitfulness of the evolutionary paradigm itself. Maybe it is not temporal succession (tradition/modernity) that is at stake, but something else, discussed by means of temporal succession?

In the middle of the twenties Norwegian architectural debate largely ran along axes like national/international, particular/universal, falseness/honesty, façade/structure – dichotomies concerned less with novelty than with substantial values, notably the value of authenticity. And in a greater span of time, allowing the modern era to include the last 250 years, a common denominator may be less an ethics of progress than an ethics of authenticity,⁶ a norm that is claimed polemically (in various ways) by both classicism, historicism, and modernism.

But first a glance at two primary axes of conflict:

First axis: classic/romantic

With the literary "Querelle des anciens et des modernes" the modern was adopted as a temporal concept, i.e. the new vs. the old – a dichotomy that implied a

substantial content: romantic vs. classic. With this polarisation "the classic" got ascribed to it a function that has been maintained until today, as stated in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*: Since the end of the 18th century classical art is tied to "Objektivität, Natürlichkeit, plastische Gestaltung (Geschlossenheit), Sinn für das Reale, Maß und Harmonie". It is noteworthy that the *Historisches Wörterbuch* also views the distinction between the classic and its counter concepts as a fruitful heuristic principle in twentieth century theory of art and literature.⁷ And the dichotomy may be applied to architecture: In *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914) Geoffrey Scott still considers classic and romantic style as architecture's two and only alternatives.⁸

Classic/romantic is a dichotomy that takes care of substantial oppositions. But as the concepts constitute themselves polemically, they also reveal their interdependence – not as successive but permanent alternatives. When J. Mourdant Crook discusses romanticism and neo-classicism, he refuses to regard them as independent categories:⁹

Of course Classic and Romantic represent different states of mind. Authority and freedom, order and disorder, tyranny and anarchy, moderation and excess, ideal and real, fact and fantasy, finite and infinite, clarity and obscurity, regularity and irregularity, sophistication and innocence, reason and imagination, logic and faith, calculation and spontaneity, form and spirit, common sense and uncommon sensibility – these are the traditional polarities. They are different states of mind – but different states of the same mind, as interdependent as the male and female principles. (...) "Classical and romantic", wrote Sir Herbert Grierson, "– these are the systole and diastole of the human heart in history."¹⁰

So it is not surprising that one – even today – may catch at this dichotomy to fill an otherwise empty concept of modernity: The sociologist Willy Guneriusen defines modernity in temporal terms as post-traditionalism, but also points to a distinction between rationalist (classic) and non-rationalist (romantic) concepts of modernity, a distinction that has been more influential in the humanities – especially in analyses of aes-

thetic modernism – than in the social sciences, which tend to identify modernisation with rationalisation.¹¹

It is remarkable that modernity, constituting itself polemically against tradition in both classic and romantic (/historicist) versions, nevertheless may be forced to qualify itself by these twins of tradition. Novelty does not suffice.

Second axis: tradition/modernity

Still, novelty became the basic mode of understanding during the late nineteenth century. In Nordic historiography of literature Georg Brandes, with his concept “The Modern Breakthrough”, replaced the dichotomy classicism/romanticism with romanticism/realism. Romantic no longer meant the new but the old, and novelty was hallmarked as a criterion of aesthetic quality.

Brandes’ scheme soon shaped Norwegian cultural debate. Elaborating this point, the literary historian Asbjørn Aarseth refers to Karl Popper’s criticism of historians who deny the multiplicity of a given epoch and select their objects in accordance with an idea of the “best” art, i.e. the one that most visibly breaks with the past and points forward. The notion of the avant-garde rules historiography; the art historian fixes his attention on the new and “progressive”.¹²

As Aarseth employs Popper on literary history, David Watkin employs him on architectural history: “The belief in progress in which everyone sees himself merely as part of a link in a moving chain is a Hegelian doctrine” condemned by Popper as historicism: “Historicism claims that nothing is of greater importance than the emergence of a really new period.”¹³

In Watkin’s view the historians of architecture tend to explain architecture as a manifestation of something else: religion, politics, sociology, or the *Zeitgeist*.¹⁴ The *Zeitgeist* notion leads to moral relativism, as the spirit is believed to have a new and homogenous expression in every epoch.¹⁵ So the belief in *Zeitgeist* is connected to the belief in progress.

It is this – really reductionist – alliance historicism/modernism that Watkin locates in a span from the Gothic Revival-ideologist A.W.N. Pugin to the modernist Nikolaus Pevsner, and he mocks Pevsner’s apparent use of a building’s potential for misdating as a cri-

terion of quality – as when Pevsner admires Frank Lloyd Wright’s early buildings because they look late.¹⁶

So we are back with Geoffrey Scott,¹⁷ who in his fight for classical architecture opposed it to four fallacies that reduce architecture to a function of something else, i.e. extra-aesthetical: “The biological fallacy” is the paradigm of evolution:

So long as the sequence of Renaissance styles continued unbroken, the standards of which architecture was judged grew and developed within architecture itself. (...) Style itself, and not the succession of styles, engrossed men’s thought. The sequence, as a sequence, was not studied. But when, in the nineteenth century, the sequence was cut short and a period of “revivals” was initiated, the standards of taste were multiplied and confused; past things became contemporary with present. Sequence – the historical relation of style to style – now was studied, when sequence itself had ceased to be.¹⁸

The triangle

Entering the twentieth century, a concept of modernity stressing substance (romantic vs. classic) has been largely replaced by a concept stressing sequence (novelty vs. tradition). The same year as Scott publishes his book, the World War smashes the nineteenth century paradigm of happy evolution. In the interwar period the main stylistic varieties of the eighteenth and nineteenth century are hastily repeated, almost as if “sequence itself had ceased to be”. And in the Norwegian 1920s we may witness both a discourse of cultural conflict along the axis tradition/modernity, and a promotion of classicism implicitly reactivating the axis classic/romantic but constantly in danger of being absorbed by the first axis.

Is there, then, a way of viewing this epoch that takes care of both the temporal and substantial oppositions and the different interests that shape the debate, capturing the ambiguities of the time better than a single dichotomy?

Norwegian interwar architecture is conventionally divided into three: historicism as expressed in the national romanticism of the First World War and shortly

after, the neo-classicism of the twenties and the modernism of the thirties.¹⁹ In the early twenties Norwegian architectural debate is marked by an alternation of generations, a confrontation between an old national (/historical) and a young international (/classical) wing, and entering the thirties, modern functionalism radically opposes both historicism and classicism.

The question is whether the tension between historicism, classicism and modernism – not by virtue of their chronological succession but by their position as conceptual cornerstones – provides a more dynamic frame of interpretation for the interwar debate, untying the simple binary opposition tradition/modernity. Like a Weberian ideal type, the model is not a reproduction of reality, but a conventionalised scheme with which to confront and discuss reality. Similar models have been suggested by different theorists, fruitfully widening the field of discussion.²⁰

The three styles are visually pronounced but theoretically ambiguous. Classicism is rooted in history but also has a universal ambition, hence a tension between tradition and universality. Historicism first occurs in the nineteenth century as a romantic-expressive anti-classicism, taking the side of particularity against universality. Still it shares with classicism the imitation codex committing it to a given tradition, hence a compound of tradition and subjectivity. Modernism appears with timeless, universal and rational ambitions – like classicism – but also accents subjective expression, hence a tension between subjectivity and universality.

So what if we rotate the axis and focus on three concepts that are not linked unambiguously to the styles, but may be discussed by means of them – that is tradition, universality and subjectivity?

The three entities all define themselves polemically: modernism against tradition, historicism against universality, and classicism against subjectivity. What do we learn from this?

We are well familiar with a debate where tradition is

at stake. Tradition is expressed in both historicism and classicism, which has led former research to focus on the breakthrough of modernism about 1930. We also may be familiar with a debate where universality is at stake. It is expressed in both classicism and modernism, which has led recent research to focus the break around 1920. But we may not be that familiar with a position putting subjectivism at stake, treating both historicism and modernism alike. Why not?

Maybe because both historicism and modernism express a prevalent way of thinking, i.e. on the post-classic premises of the nineteenth century. This may be viewed as a hegemony of interpretation supported by strong ideological and social interests: the particularly national in political debate, the particularly psychological in moral debate. But this subjectivity is exactly what classicism attacks.

Classical art has been characterized by a certain notion of distance, a lack of subjective "heartiness". Julius Stenzel once proposed a post-classical development towards greater Innerlichkeit, revealing itself in religion, aesthetics – and in the concept of history. The notion of uniqueness radically sharpens the individual self-esteem, and it also reveals itself in the historicist notion of unique epochs and accordingly national uniqueness.²¹

So the neo-classicism of the 1920s may be regarded not as an expression of transition on the axis tradition/modernity, but as an attack on a hegemonic paradigm constituted by nineteenth century subjectivism and progressivism.²²

Summing up

The first point of the triangular model is the accent of classicism, removing it from a transitional status and accenting its opposition to subjectivism (in both historicist and modernist varieties), hence transposing the classic/romantic controversy to the twentieth century. The model still shows the affinities of classicism to the other poles (tradition linking it to historicism, universality to modernism), which explain its ambig-



Per Anders Aas, Associate Professor of Religion and Ethics, Faculty of Education, Oslo University College
peranders.aas@lu.hio.no

ous position in the art historians' temporally oriented tug-of-war.

The second point is that romantic historicism is revealed not only as a variety of tradition, but as sharing a notion of progress (by the historicist notion of the unique), which explains the link between historicism and modernism (and their contrast to classicism), even the line from Pugin to Pevsner, provocatively proposed by Watkin.²³

The third point is that modernism is visualized not only as anti-traditional, but also as containing a tension (maybe an irreconcilable cleavage) between the subjective-expressive and the universal – or with a slightly different bias: between its non-rationalist (romantic) and rationalist (classical) varieties. This suggests a somewhat parasitic property of modernism: it may be thrown back on the classic or the romantic when its substantial values are to be determined.

Finally: I suggested the notion of authenticity as a common value in the interwar debate. What we may see is a classical concept of authenticity, i.e. human fulfillment within a frame of tradition and universality, being attacked (as insincere) both by a romantic/historicist notion of authenticity as subjective expression, and by a modernist notion of authenticity as intersubjective rationality.

Notes

1. This text is partly based on the paper "Classicism – historicism – modernism. Architectural concepts as a gateway to Norwegian cultural debate 1920–30", summarily presented at the conference Architecture, Aesth/Ethics, and Religion, NTNU, May 11.–12. 2001 (to be published in Sigurd Bergmann(ed.), Architecture, Aesth/Ethics, and

Religion, Frankfurt am Main: IKO – Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2004), and partly on chapter 5.2 in my thesis *Dannelse i krise. Klassisk humanisme i møte med det moderne*: Harry Fett, Charles Kent og A. H. Winsnes 1918–33, submitted for the degree of dr. art. at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, December 2002. The core of the paper – the triangular model – was developed during my work with the thesis and first presented in the paper "Kritisk klassisisme. Klassisismen som kulturkritisk strategi på 'den annen front' i norsk mellomkrigstid, med særlig vekt på Harry Fett", delivered at a seminar on Norwegian reception of antiquity, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, May 4. 1999. (The subject of my thesis is neo-humanist cultural criticism in the Norwegian 1920s. Neo-humanism may not be smoothly attached to a radical/conservative-axis, but it has a pronounced visual counterpart in the neo-classical architecture of the period, which I employ as a reference of interpretation. For an account of interwar neo-humanism, cf. my article "Den annen front: idealister uten 'sak'", in Egil Børre Johnsen & Trond Berg Eriksen (eds.), *Norsk litteraturhistorie. Sakprosa fra 1750 til 1995*, vol. 2: 1920–1995, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1998, pp. 68–71/702–3.)

2. Cf. Sigmund Skard, *Classical Tradition in Norway*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1980, pp. 128–151.

3. "In order to understand the classicism of the early twentieth century, it is necessary to maintain that there is a deep division between the apparent classicism of the late nineteenth century – what is traditionally and with disparagement called 'confusion of styles', today more neutrally named historicism – and the classicism of the 1920s. The two forms of expression overlap in time, classical motives are used in both epochs, but the architectural content is never the same."

Elisabeth Seip, "1920-tallsklassisismen – den foreløpige siste klassisismen?", in Karin Gundersen & Magne Malmanger (eds.), *I fortidens speil. Klassikk og klassisisme i*

- Vestens kultur, Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998, pp. 378–395, cit. p. 379. (My translation.) A similar view is held by Kari Hoel, "Etter 1900. En ny klassisisme: idé og debatt", in Gundersen & Malmanger, op. cit., pp. 359–377.
4. "The epoch's view on form – the cubistic notion – respect for the distinctive character of the materials and the employment of a new building technique make neo-classicism part of the modern architecture of our century. There is a deep division between the national romanticism around 1905 and the neo-classicism of the 1920s. But I cannot see a similar division between neo-classicism and modernism or functionalism. (...) On the contrary, both styles are internationally orientated and founded on the same basic architectonic notions." Seip, op. cit., p. 392. (My translation.)
 5. The opposition between national romanticism and neo-classicism was expressed in a series of polemic articles in *Dagbladet* in the middle of the twenties. (Henrik Sørensen 24.11.15, 24.12.13, 25.12.28, 26.05.05; Gudolf Blakstad 24.11.22, 24.12.17, 26.04.14; Erik Werenskiold (interview) 26.04.10, 26.04.24; W. Werenskiold 26.05.04; Frithjof Rojahn 26.04.17; Jacob Christie Kielland 26.04.22; Tormod Hustad 26.04.28; Edvard Heiberg 26.05.01, 26.05.26; Einar M. Hauglie 26.05.29; Peter Daniel Hofflund 26.06.02; Knut Greve 26.06.07; Dyre Vaa 26.07.23. The articles are planned to be published by Espen Johnsen and Mari Lending in an anthology about the modernism debate.) For the architectural debates, cf. also Ingeborg Glambeke, *Funksjonalismens gjennombrudd i Norge. Debatt og ideologisk bakgrunn*, mag. art.-thesis in Art history, University of Oslo 1970.
 6. The point is elaborated – not dealing with architecture but culture in general, in Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1991.
 7. B. Allemann, "Klassische (das)", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 4, Basel: Schwabe, 1976, pp. 853–856.
 8. Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism. A Study in the History of Taste*, New York & London: Norton, 1999 (1914), cf. Seip, op. cit., p. 381.
 9. Crook quotes Robert Rosenblum's warning that after about 1760, "Western art becomes so hydra-headed that the historian who attacks it from a single approach is sure to be defeated". Crook still singles out the Greek Revival in British architecture to illuminate the whole picture, but finds it hard to isolate: "Greek Revivalism was but one aspect of Neo-Classicism, and Neo-Classicism – I believe – cannot be entirely separated from Romanticism." J. Mourdant Crook, *The Greek Revival. Neo-Classical Attitudes in British Architecture 1760–1870*, London: John Murray, 1995 (1972), pp. x–xi.
 10. Crook, op. cit., p. 65.
 11. Willy Guneriusen, *Å forstå det moderne. Framskrittstro, rasjonalitet, ambivalens og irrasjonalitet i diskursen om modernitet*, Oslo: Tano, 1999, p. 15.
 12. Asbjørn Aarseth, "Periodisering i de estetiske disiplinene", in Siri Meyer (ed.), *Estetikk og historisitet*, Bergen: [NAVF], 1990, pp. 115–128.
 13. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), cited in David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture Revisited*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001 (1977), p. xxiv.
 14. Watkin, op. cit., p. 5.
 15. Watkin, op. cit., p. 121.
 16. "Yet if interest in art or architecture is supposed to centre on objects which can be misdated because they are 'ahead of their time', there can surely be no logical reason for giving more praise to an object because it looks later than it is, than to an object which looks earlier than it is." Watkin, op. cit., p. 103.
 17. Watkin also makes the reference; Watkin, op. cit., p. 102.
 18. Scott, op. cit., p. 127.
 19. For a thorough account of the interwar positions, cf. Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Fra nasjonalromantikk til funksjonalisme. Norsk arkitektur 1914–1940", in *Mellomkrigstid. Norges kunsthistorie* bd. 6, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1983, pp. 7–111.
 20. During the Oslo conference where I delivered the present paper (April 2003), it was brought to my attention that Erik Nygaard has developed a similar scheme, expanding the dichotomy between a traditionalist and a modernist position by dividing the traditional pole into two, a vernacular and a classicist. To quote Nygaard, it is "en model, ifølge hvilken hele det 20. århundredes kulturliv har svinget frem og tilbake mellom en modernistisk og en traditionalistisk pol. / Den traditionalistiske pol kan igen opdeles i to, en folkloristisk og en klassicistisk, og man får dermed en treleddet model, der i eminent grad giver de tre positioner, der i det 20. århundrede har stået åben for kunstnere og arkitekter. De tre poler er forbundet på forskellig vis. Klassicismen og folklorismen er fælles om traditionalismen. Klassicismen og modernismen har rationalismen og måske platonismen tilfælles. Modernismen og folklorismen har funktionalismen og et demokratisk element tilfælles." (Erik Nygaard, "Ny-modernismen som modernismens tredje og postmoderne fase", in *Modernismens genkomst*, en antologi, Copenhagen: Arkitektens Forlag, 2001, pp. 137–146.) Nygaard structures his book *Arkitektur i en forvirret tid* (1995) by means of the same model, which again is inspired by Jan Mægaard's *Musikalsk modernisme* (1964), describing three roads in the development of classical music after World War 1. Nygaard's model confirms the heuristic value of a trilateral approach, and the dispari-

ties compared with my own scheme may generate fruitful discussions, which I regret I cannot pursue within the limits of this paper.

21. Julius Stenzel, "Die Gefahren modernen Denkens und der Humanismus" (1928), in Hans Oppermann (ed.), *Humanismus*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 85–110. Cf. the adherent notion of authenticity: Taylor, *op. cit.*
22. An alliance between radical and conservative positions is elegantly visualized in the modernist architect Ove Bang's masterpiece, the headquarters of the Home mission. Cf. my article, "Ove Bangs bygg – Ole Hallesbys hus. Arkitektur og ideologi i Staffeldts gate 4", in Asbjørn Aarnes & Ole Andreas Bjerkeset (eds.), *Gjensyn med Hallesby*, Oslo: Lunde, 2002, pp. 98–109/139–144.
23. Cf. Watkin, *op. cit.*, p. xv.