

# LIQUID MODERNITY

STER CENTURY CINEMA

LUMEN/EVOLUTION/CATH

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**Welcome.**

My name is Griselda Pollock and I am the Director of the AHRB Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History, familiarly known as CentreCATH.

Located at the University of Leeds, we are a relatively new transdisciplinary initiative, which now appears to me to bear the imprint of what Zygmunt Bauman has named Liquid Modernity: which is what we are here to consider and discuss.

The foundational universities of Germany and Europe in the nineteenth century carved the fields of knowledge into discrete academic territories named disciplines, each of which developed its own methods, traditions and ethos with regard to its defining object. In many senses the disciplinary cartography of knowledge echoed the creations of the nation states which formed the solid ground of identity, belonging, community, political entities and economies. In the 1960s, pressures from both within and without in the

larger socio-economic processes led to the emergence of interdisciplinary models for study and practice. Indeed this term, confusing as it often is, has become a watchword now --with little understanding of its meanings or what it reflects about what is actually happening to us. The project of CentreCATH is a critical one: rather than simply going with the flow towards the current fashion, we wanted to stand back and question the nature of the production not merely of knowledge but understanding, which as Zygmunt Bauman himself explains in *Liquid Modernity* are slightly but importantly different. The transdisciplinary shares the features of a deterritorialisation of the process of knowledge and understanding by opening the borders, and dismantling the frontiers between both disciplines and the new interdisciplines which are institutionally just as disciplinary now, with their degree programmes and benchmarks and so forth. How can we engage with the possibilities of exchange and dialogue that alone will disseminate the practices of critical thinking and yield understanding if we have no common space of encounter?

How do we understand what is happening to us, what is going on? We are bombarded with information, indeed we might well complain of an overload of information now assaulting us through the technologies of the

everyday Internet and cell phone communications systems. Speed and efficiency of transmission intensify the load that each of us must bear, calling forth immediate rather than considered responses which float off into a cyberspace of infinite but unheard informational noise.

For many years Zygmunt Bauman has endeavoured to explain the vital significance of a critical and thoughtful sociology as the practice of thinking about what is happening in the concrete worlds of lived social, communal and individual experience and life worlds. Serving as social diagnostician, who is none the less, utterly embedded and engaged himself in the social process, Zygmunt Bauman has called our attention to the attenuation of the public sphere, the replacement of the citizen with the consumer, to the significance of the disciplining of the body through regimes of fitness and performance, to the intensive individualisation of identity as something not given but perpetually being made up with commodified tools provided by the ever encroaching but ever less visible forms of global capital.

But Zygmunt Bauman is no Jeremiah, railing against the new. He is a thinker, an inheritor and transformer of the great tradition of the intellectual as ethical, socially responsible analyst. Neither prophet nor judge, the intellectual created by the tradition of sociology which Zygmunt

Bauman embodies and develops to current levels of exquisite insight thinks on our behalf, in order to catch the dialectics of our moment. The complexity of our struggles for freedom, justice and indeed happiness which are not simply to be found in absolutisms of any one system, but belong to our epoch as its difficult and still challenging ambition.

It is in this sense that the seminar today on his theorisation of our moment not as post-modern, but as liquid modern intends to open his thinking to this audience and constituency who may not be daily readers of advanced sociological thought and debate. We know that something has shifted and we are offered several pat explanations under the rubric of the post modern. Many years ago I was struck by Zygmunt's profound statement: that we do not need a post-modern sociology but a sociology of the post-modern. We need some critical relation to the processes that are currently forming us and from which we cannot escape, but which we need to understand in order to act within them as social agents, as what used to be dreamt of in the democratic ideals of citizenship and participation in the public realm.

One of our purposes today is to consider the relations between the shift from solid, defined, localised, territorialised, nation-bound modernity to that which ZB names as liquid: catching up in this phrase the effects of globalisation, migration, nomadism, tourism, the effects of world wide webs and internets, socket free phones and texters, a world and subjectivities redefined by interaction with the huge and fascinating potentials of new technologies and information systems. For this reason we have also invited Professor Antony Bryant to converse with Zygmunt Bauman. Starting his studies as a natural scientist, Tony Bryant changed to become a social scientist working with Anthony Giddens before doing a doctorate at LSE on the new left: on Raymond Williams and Jurgen Habermas and the political of instrumental reason and communication. Mrs Thatcher's negation of society as a concept impacted badly on prospective sociologists and after a significant appointment at Leeds working with Zygmunt Bauman, Prof. Bryant again shifted direction, anticipating the liquid intellectual that is constantly proposed to us or perhaps just showing off as a Renaissance man. This time he converted to computer science and information management, bringing to this commercial and then academic study the experience of a training in philosophy, sociology and cultural studies. Uniquely able to bridge the

world of information management and sociological analysis he works with Bauman's legacy to demythify the mystique of new technology and information and to enable an intelligent engagement with its significance socially and humanly.

CentreCATH knows that any productive intellectual project must engage with cutting edge social thinkers who attend to what is actually happening to our life worlds: globalisation, new technology, information management, and so forth. But against those who think in these larger structural ways, seeking out trends and patterns, we also attend to another kind of intellectual, social thinker and cultural analyst, the artist. So often positioned and self-positioned as part of the commodity marketing of mere entertainment, the shift from solid to liquid modernity has also shown itself in rendering archaic the heroic age of the artistic avant-garde. It was a real shock when I came fully to appreciate how ancient the founding gestures of European modernism at the beginning of the 20c now seemed, how ponderous, self-important, and embarrassingly engaged. Indeed we coined the phrase the archaeology of the modern to acknowledge the depth of the rupture and yet the significance of carefully reconsidering the gap. Our

third speaker today whom I am honoured to introduce to you, Gustav Metzger bridges this moment of rupture while critically interrupting the flow with the singularity of his statements in and as art practice. Training with David Bomberg, Metzger drew on a whole history of political dissent in art and began in the late 1950s with his first manifestos and destruction performance pieces. Metzger made a huge impact as secretary to the immensely important Destruction in Art Symposium in London 1966: itself a transdisciplinary and transnational event that brought together a range of artists engaged in a variety of practices whose processes as well as effects challenged the corruption of art by commodification and the corruption and endangering of society through the irresponsible developments of inhumane technologies of destruction - from weapons to environmental damage to chemical infiltration of food. In an age of informational massification, what was once an individualistic gesture that belonged to the gameplay of avant-garde and bourgeois public, the making of an art work by an artist, acquires a new valency as a critical insistence on singularity - to speak in one's own name not as a manufactured individual made up of a variety of purchased or pre-packaged identities - is once again a radical gesture that halts the flow, requiring us to pause at work that does not easily yield a quick fix, but

demands work from us, work of decipherment, of being asked to think our way through the use of material, the choices being made to assemble signifying elements., to call upon a partner who is not merely a passing shopper. In a series in 1990 *historic photographs*, the viewer could not see the images unless they crawled under a cloth or moved away the boards. History needed to be confronted in active participation and discomfort, to be in a performative relation to meaning. In 1998 the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, organised a retrospective devoted to *Gustav Metzger* placing an increasingly invisible programme of life work back in the view of new generations of artists and students who found the prescience of the project and the fidelity of the artist to his analysis of the complex relations of destruction and creativity truly food for thought.

Artistic practice can be one of the major sites of critical thought, and we need the ethos of artists compelled to interrupt the flow of culture around them, to destroy our illusions and expose the destructiveness of society's engines of production, consumption and blindness. *Gustav Metzger* was born 1927 almost the same year as Zygmunt Bauman and his young Jewish life was wrenched from its destined shape by the same irruption of fascist

destructiveness and terror. Sent to Britain on the Kindertransports which in saving their lives, exiled the children from their homes and separated them from their families, Gustav Metzger emerged as an artist in the heart of the cultures of the cold war in which the violent escalation of weapons of mass destruction held the world hostage to a perpetual terror of imminent destruction setting the major systems of modernity -capitalism and totalitarianism - in deadly competition. It will be an extraordinary and historic event today to create the space of encounter and dialogue between these two profoundly responsible men of the history of the twentieth century precisely so that we know a) that we must think, always, critically and profoundly if we are to count ourselves as the inheritors of the dreams of modernity for justice, for democracy, for the release from suffering and b) that thought leading of understanding so that we can be participants and makers of our worlds looks in several directions.

I want to end by recalling the former East German communist thinker Rudolf Bahro who was exiled for his radical thought. Reviewing the spiritual desolation of totalitarian betrayal of socialism, the widespread depression of the inhabitants of so-called socialist states, he imagined the education

system, necessary for transformation. He suggested that every child needs access to two modes: one sociological in which his or her place in the larger scheme of things can be understood. The other was aesthetic education, what he called knowing for yourself.

It is at this intersection of the synthetic and the aesthetic, of knowing broadly and subjectively that we bring together this remarkable panel of speakers within this event. I want to thank them all for participation and my appreciation of Lumen for this association and collaboration.