

“All That Is Solid Melts into Air” demonstrates Berman’s ability to acknowledge modernity cannot exist without contradiction. The very idea of modernity is riddled with contradiction and Berman writes about these contradictions through the entire book. He discusses the fundamental ‘self’ contradiction that each person experiences when exploring modernity. In addition, Berman discusses the contradiction that exists when moving forward as a society. In several instances, he discusses whether theorists believe modernity requires unity among a society or whether it requires the opposite. Through most of the book, Berman takes a rather neutral stance and admits that modernity exists somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between the extremes and, more or less, requires both of the extremes to exist.

One of the first discussions of a ‘self’ contradiction comes as Berman analyzes Baudelaire’s interpretation of a café on a boulevard. The introduction of the boulevard, which became a model for societies, brought many societal contradictions to the forefront of conversation. In “The Family of Eyes” Berman provides more depth into Baudelaire’s interpretation of the modernization of society. Not only does the boulevard enhance a couple’s ability to love one another, it also brings society closer in a way that previously was an unknown option. Baudelaire uses the couple at a café as a metaphor for society at the time. When staring at a completely new circumstance in the eyes, do you accept it or call upon the more powerful to remove it. This is a perfect representation of how society could embrace modern life. While the man has a desire to embrace the opportunity, the woman at the same table, staring into the same eyes asks for the more powerful to remove the poverty ridden family. The man’s inability to even respond outlines that modernity is not the relaxed or neutral mode for most people in a society. Instead, consistency is more loudly and frequently desired (Berman 148-154)

If, as a reader, you choose to look at the couple as one person, it is easy to see the ‘self’ contradictions that likely exist in each and every person experiencing modernity. As the world around us continues to change, we either accept it or embrace it but first we must experience this contradiction of self-discovery and self-mockery. In my eyes, it is self-mockery to assume your status quo is more fundamental to the success of the universe than the change that modernity brings.

Baudelaire was a well printed poet through the majority of his life. However, when he decided to publish a more layered piece titled “Loss of a Halo” he received pushback from the print publishers. While Baudelaire contradicts a few of his key concepts in this work, he strongly emphasizes the role of the individual in a modern society. The man loses his halo because he is surrounded by modernism. He is being charged by cars and automobiles from every direction and the halo simply falls of his head. What’s unique about this moment is that, when asked, he denies wanting to pick the halo up. This action is partly out of fear but also, in my eyes, a way of embracing the modernity that is literally surrounding him from every direction. The few quotes that Berman chose to highlight from this piece feel much more human and grounded than Baudelaire’s previous work which was heavily rooted in spirituality in a traditional sense (Berman 155-164)

The contradiction Baudelaire’s work experienced is one that modernity continues to experience as well. The idea of modernity exists naturally. It is in human nature to grow as a society. The contradiction in the idea of modernity comes when people assume that the status quo does not include modernity. Ironically, modernity is a part of the status quo. When people take it upon themselves to stay as they are and reshape the status quo as remaining in exactly the

same point they oppose the status quo and they oppose modernity. Opposition to modernity opens the door for people to finally see the concept of modernity.

In Pleasantville, we see what a status quo that excludes modernity can look like. This film takes an incredibly direct approach to visualizing modernity. In the town of Pleasantville, the society has reached a point that they are satisfied with and has agreed to remain as they are. When they make this decision, they decide to exclude modernity from their status quo. When David and Jennifer arrive in Pleasantville, the concept of modernity is reintroduced to society. This introduction of modernity creates a significant divide among the people, one that likely would have never existed if the people had not excluded modernity from their status quo. Again, it took this decision to allow them to see what modernity truly looks like. The turmoil continues until finally the people of Pleasantville stop opposing the concept of modernity and reintroduce it into their status quo. (Pleasantville)

Another concept the film makers of Pleasantville leaned heavily on is the concept of self-discovery. Self-discovery is almost as fundamental to the success of the plot as modernity is. The introduction of modernity is one that fuels mass self-discovery among people who reintroduce modernity into their status quo. In this situation however, I think the plot contradicts Berman's understanding of the contradiction between self-discovery and self-mockery. In the case of the teens of Pleasantville, the introduction of modernity leads to self-mockery which leads to self-discovery. This suggests that self-mockery is a stage on the timeline that is prompted by accepting modernity again as a part of the status quo. (Pleasantville)

As another representation of this timeline, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* follows Hushpuppy through her timeline. The bathtub is similar to Pleasantville in that it too has reached a point in time it is satisfied with and, in an attempt to stay at that point, has neglected modernity as a part of the status quo. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* looks at modernity in a few unique ways.

First, the film addresses the unique culture that is created when the society neglects the concept of modernity. When they decide not to grow they are left in a constant state of fear of the others. They know that their society is not only a target of the ‘others’ but their society is also a weaker society than that of the others. As a whole, the bathtub feels like a thing of the past. The way that they live, hunt, and communicate is a style of the past. With the exception of the hospital scene and the short boat trip to the dam, the film never directly contrasts their life to that of the others. Yet they are aware that the others exist and that they are more developed. Even though they accept this, they refuse to adapt to a life that modernity would have introduced. In a stark contrast to Pleasantville, when faced with an option to embrace modernity in the hospital they flee back to the life that they know. (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*)

The second way *Beasts of the Southern Wild* looks at the concept of modernity takes a more feminist approach. The film makes it very clear that Hushpuppy’s father represents the old way of life. As the film reaches an apex, we see that he is clearly trying to ensure Hushpuppy’s success and he sees making her more “manly” as the only way to achieve this. As Hushpuppy is pushed more and more she disagrees and becomes more and more independent. She ventures out on her own in search of answers and returns a changed person. While she cannot save the Bathtub or her father, she seeks answers independently and finds them with other girls. This is an incredibly feminist approach to the concept of modernity. She breaks the binds of the past that

her father tried placing on her and she lived independently in search of answers. (Beasts of the Southern Wild)

Even more interesting is the way modernity is contrasted between the Bathtub and the rest of society. As the Bathtub begins to embrace a feminist style of modernity, it suggests that modernity can exist on different tracks. It depends on the way you look at society. Modernity can exist at an individual level, a small group level, a society level, and a global level. Each of these is depicted in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. This brings about Berman's argument around the contradiction of unity and disunity. With similarities to the way Baudelaire painted the varying layers of modernity in the world, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* draws a picture of the layers and tracks of modernity in today's world. (Beasts of the Southern Wild)

Finally, and in an interesting contradiction, the film depicts the dangers of excluding modernity from the status quo by drawing a parallel between the health of the father and the weather at the Bathtub. While Hushpuppy's father continues to get sicker, so does the bathtub. He refuses to seek modern help, as does the Bathtub, and it eventually results in his death. Traditionally, when we analyze modernity, modernity is the cause of the demise of the environment. In this film however, we see that the exclusion of modernity in the status quo acts as the perpetrator. (Beasts of the Southern Wild)

The final contradiction to be looked at when it comes to modernity is how it connects to its past. Berman refers to today's modernity as an "age that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity" (17). Using Pleasantville as an example: the modernity of the past is what got them to the point they are comfortable with but they stopped embracing the change and they

became comfortable. It is likely they would have remained comfortable without someone pointing out that they have excluded modernity from their status quo.

This contradiction is also present in the rhetoric that surrounds private vs. public. Historically, modernity has lived primarily in the public world. While it is fundamental that each person experience modernity, it is crucial that a society at a holistic level embraces modernity. In the past, this has always occurred in public spaces. The progression of modernity has empowered the private life in today's society. In the past, private life has been the antithesis of modernity. The growth of the private life and the reduction of life spent in public suggests that we too are losing the roots of the modernity of the past. (Dvorak. Private/Public Spaces.). This growth is especially true through the life of the metropolis. As the metropolis entered society, was embraced, and then ignored; life became more and more private (Dvorak. Metropolis and Post Metropolis). This reduction of traditional public spaces is one that may lead us on a path to our own Pleasantville or Bathtub. That being said, while we reduce the amount of traditional public spaces in our society, we are introducing the concept of digital public space. Whether this can replace the traditional concept of public space will only be revealed if we experience a metaphorical visit from a David and Jennifer.

Of the contradictions discussed by Berman in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, I agree most with the present losing touch with the past. While this concept in itself is a contradiction, it is true that for modernity to continue to be present in society, the people of the present must be consciously looking backwards at their growth. The only way to see the existence of modernity in society is to look back at its influence. Without this incredibly fundamental process, it is likely

that every individual, group, or society will become representative of Pleasantville in the beginning of the film.

Finally, modernity is inherently influenced by Marx's belief that "the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon everyone with a 20,000 pound force, but do you feel it?"(Berman 19). The atmosphere, like modernity, is a constant that has a constant impact on the way we experience the world. Because the atmosphere is so reliably constant, we are unaware of its presence until we try to oppose it. When a space shuttle attempts to leave the atmosphere, it must counteract this constant in our lives and this is the only time we know the true force of the atmosphere. Berman was correct about the idea of modernity being a contradiction because you have to oppose it to see it in the present but modernity can exist without opposition. It will just exist beneath the dangerous veil of ignorance.

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