The pessimism of modern man comes from the realization that there is no “universal system” that can explain everything. Man with himself at the center of the universe cannot explain the world and how it got here, or even man and his place in it. Today, knowledge has become relative. The relativity of knowledge allows for many perspectives. Many people can have different views, without there being a “right” or “wrong” view. Many different views are just many different views, many different concepts, theories, ideas, systems, none are right or wrong--they are just different.

In a culture we see the same “relative” approach to concepts, styles, morals, views, some competing, some supporting but none are better or worse than any other. This “relativity” emphasizes disconnection and chaos not coherence, connectivity, and order. How did we get to this point? How did so much of the world come to have these beliefs about pessimism and relativism?

If the “Age of Nonreason” was the recognition of man’s pessimism and his resulting flight into absurdity, then, the “Age of Fragmentation” represents the modes of communication of that pessimism and Nonreason. Rather than a philosophy, the Age of Fragmentation is really the story of how modern pessimism has been propagated geographically, culturally and socially to almost all mankind.

Schaeffer opens this chapter of How Should We Then Live with the following statement: “Modern pessimism and modern fragmentation have spread in three distinct ways across to people of our own culture and to people worldwide. Geographically, it spread from the European mainland to England, after a time jumping the Atlantic to the United States. Culturally, it spread in the various disciplines from philosophy to art, to music, to general culture (the novel, poetry, drama, films), and to theology. Socially, it spread from the intellectuals to the educated and then through the mass media to everyone.” It is primarily in the culture, through its art, music, literature, and drama/films that man comes to learn how sees and understands himself. It is in the output of modern culture that the humanist’s soul is revealed. As we consider the “Age of Fragmentation” consider the statement that “As a man thinketh, so is he.”

The social spread of modern pessimism introduced a phenomenon that has been called the “generation gap.” The generation gap came about as the younger generations were introduced to new thoughts and ideas while their elders still held the “old” ways. Those who held the old ways did so more from habit than conviction. They were without a foundation for the values they claimed to hold so dear. With the recognition by the younger generation that there was no basis for the beliefs that their elders held, a gap in belief systems of the generations appeared. Dead traditions, empty values, force of habit, described the older generation while change, new thinking, pessimism in reason, optimism in Nonreason, became the foundation for the values of the younger generation. Welcome to the generation gap.

Today, Western Culture has almost reached what Schaeffer calls a “monolithic consensus.” The overwhelming consensus is the basic dichotomy of humanism—reason leads to pessimism and optimism is in the area of Nonreason. This view was
first taught in philosophy, then it was presented in art, music, literature, and drama/film, seeping throughout the culture, eventually even into theology—Welcome to the Age of Fragmentation!

How did art come to be used as a vehicle for modern thought? Art in general and painting in particular has always seemed to represent the thought of the day. It is one thing to read about the thought of a particular period but the thought comes alive when one looks at the art of the period. It was no different with modern thought and its wrestling with the “dichotomy of humanism” and modern art. As Schaeffer explains, the way to modern art began in response to “the way naturalists were painting.” The naturalist painters could replicate the scene which they were painting but the viewer was left to ask the question “Is there any meaning to what I am looking at?” And on reflection the answer was no because the “art had become sterile.” This began to change with the rise of Impressionism.

Impressionism was a major movement, first in painting and later in music, that developed primarily in France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Impressionist painting comprises the work produced between about 1867 and 1886 by a group of artists who shared a set of related approaches and techniques. The most conspicuous characteristic of Impressionism was an attempt to accurately and objectively record visual reality with transient effects of light and color. The principal Impressionist painters were Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot, Armand Guillaumin, and Frédéric Bazille, who worked together, influenced each other, and exhibited together independently. Edgar Degas and Paul Cézanne also painted in an Impressionist style for a time in the early 1870s.

The period of Impressionism and Postimpressionism painting was about appearance and reality. There were no universals in impressionistic painting. The Impressionist painters were all great artists yet their works leave unanswered the question “where is the reality?” “These men painted only what their eyes brought them, but this left the question whether there was a reality behind the light waves reaching the eyes.”

Claude Monet’s Haystack series of 1890-1891 provide us with something of a bridge between the impressionist and postimpressionist painters. The series did not function as an accurate record of sequence of time nor as a row of stacks of wheat. Instead, as Monet told Geffroy, he was "more and more driven with the need to render ce que j'eprouve”—what he felt or experienced as he encountered the world of nature. And he came to experience nature differently. "For me, landscape hardly exists at all as landscape, because its appearance is constantly changing," he said; "but it lives by virtue of its surroundings—the air and light—which vary continually." A single painting of the subject denies this constant variation over time. So what Monet pursued was not the objective fact of these stacks of grain, as defined by light and air, but how his eye perceived them over the passage of time. The landscape served, then, as a point of departure, a vehicle for artistic self-expression. Monet's series is testimony to one of the basic tenets of modern art: the notion that the artist can reconstruct nature according to
the formal and expressive potential of the image itself. One might suggest that here reality became a dream. “As reality tended to become a dream, Impressionism as a movement fell apart. With Impressionism the door was opened for art to become the vehicle for modern thought.”

Postimpressionism is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of artists who were influenced by Impressionism but took their art in other directions. The postimpressionist period lasts from 1880 to the 1900. There is no single well-defined style of Postimpressionism, but in general it is less idyllic and more emotionally charged than Impressionist work. The classic postimpressionists are Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Rousseau and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The Pointillists and Les Nabis are also generally included among the Postimpressionists.

Breaking free of the naturalism of Impressionism in the late 1880s, this group of young painters sought independent artistic styles for expressing emotions rather than simply optical impressions, concentrating on themes of deeper symbolism. By using simplified colors and definitive forms, their art was characterized by a renewed aesthetic sense as well as abstract tendencies. The postimpressionist painters, responding to Impressionism, followed diverse stylistic paths in search of authentic intellectual and artistic achievements. These artists, often working independently, are today called postimpressionists. These postimpressionists attempted to find the way back to reality, to the absolute behind the particulars. “They felt the loss of universals, tried to solve the problem, and they failed. It is not that these painters were always consciously painting their philosophy of life, but in their work as a whole, their worldview was often reflected.” The art of the great postimpressionists “became the vehicle for modern man’s view of the fragmentation of truth and life.”

For Francis Schaeffer, painting reflected philosophy. “As philosophy had moved from unity to a fragmentation, this fragmentation was also carried into the field of painting. The fragmentation shown in postimpressionist paintings was parallel to the loss of a hope for a unity of knowledge in philosophy.” For example Paul Cezanne, expressing his worldview, reduced nature to what, he considered its basic geometric forms. “In this he was searching for a universal which would tie all kinds of particulars in nature together. Nonetheless, this gave nature a fragmented, broken appearance.” Schaeffer sees this fragmentation in one of Cezanne’s better-known works Bathers (©1905). Cezanne painted many pictures with bathers, including many compositions of male and female bathers, singly or in groups. “However, in this painting Cézanne brought the appearance of fragmented reality not only to his painting of nature but to man himself. Man, too, was presented as fragmented.” There was a parallel search for the “universal in art as well as in philosophy.”

Painting expresses an idea as a work of art. From this point art could move to the extremes of ultranaturalism, such as the photo-realists or to abstraction, where “reality becomes so fragmented that it disappears, and man is left to make up his personal world.” Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), a Russian-born artist was one of the first creators of pure abstraction in modern painting.
Kandinsky was never solely a painter, but a theoretician, and organizer at the same time. A gifted author, he expressed his views on art and artistic activity in his numerous writings. After successful avant-garde exhibitions, he founded the influential Munich group Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider; 1911-14) and began completely abstract painting. His forms evolved from fluid and organic to geometric and, finally, to pictographic (e.g. Tempered Élan, 1944).

Besides painting and writing, Kandinsky was an accomplished musician. He once said: “Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.” The concept that color and musical harmony are linked has a long history, intriguing scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton. Kandinsky used color in a highly theoretical way associating tone with timbre (the sound’s character), hue with pitch, and saturation with the volume of sound. He even claimed that when he saw color he heard music. In 1912 Kandinsky wrote an article titled “About the Question of Form” in The Blue Rider saying that, “since the old harmony (a unity of knowledge) had been lost, only two possibilities remained—extreme naturalism or extreme abstraction.” “Both,” he said, “were equal.”

Pablo Picasso’s (1881-1973) painting Les Demoiselles d'Avignon is a significant work in the genesis of modern art. The painting portrays five naked prostitutes in a brothel; two pushing aside curtains around the space where the other women strike seductive and erotic poses—but their figures are composed of flat, splintered planes rather than rounded volumes, their eyes are lopsided or staring or asymmetrical, and the two women at the right have threatening masks for heads. The space, too, which should recede, comes forward in jagged shards, like broken glass. In the still life, at the bottom, a piece of melon slices the air like a scythe.

The faces of the figures at the right are influenced by African masks, which Picasso assumed had functioned as magical protectors against dangerous spirits: this work, he said later, was his "first exorcism painting." A specific danger he had in mind was life-threatening sexual disease, a source of considerable anxiety in Paris at the time; earlier sketches for the painting more clearly link sexual pleasure to mortality. In its brutal treatment of the body and its clashes of color and style (other sources for this work include ancient Iberian statuary and the work of Paul Cézanne), Les Demoiselles d'Avignon marks a radical break from traditional composition and perspective.

The result of months of preparation and revision, this painting revolutionized the art world when first seen in Picasso’s studio. Its monumental size, 8’ x 7’ 8”, underscored, “the shocking incoherence resulting from the outright sabotage of conventional representation.” Picasso drew on sources as diverse as Iberian sculpture, African tribal masks, and El Greco’s painting to make this startling composition.

In great art the technique fits the worldview being presented, and fragmentation or abstraction well fits the worldview of modern man. The technique expresses both “the
concept of a fragmented world and fragmented man.” A world-famous photographer and writer, David Douglas Duncan, a friend of Pablo Picasso, about whom he published six coffee-table books, “says about a certain set of Picasso’s pictures in Picasso’s private collection is in a way a summing up of much of Picasso’s work: ‘Of course, not one of these pictures was actually a portrait but his prophecy of a ruined world.” Abstract art “was a complete break with the art of the Renaissance which had been founded on man’s humanist hope.” We saw In Les Demoiselles d’Avignon people were no longer human: “the humanity had been lost.” This becomes increasingly apparent that the techniques of art become more advanced “humanity was increasingly fragmented.” Fragmentation and abstraction, in art, was a wide road to “the absurdity of all things.”

Dada was an informal international movement that began with the start of the First World War. Primarily, in Europe and North America, Dada was an antiwar movement, “a protest against the bourgeois nationalist and colonialist interests which many Dadaists believed were the root cause of the war, and against the cultural and intellectual conformity—in art and more broadly in society—that corresponded to the war.” Most Dadaists believed that “the 'reason' and 'logic' of bourgeois capitalist society had led people into war. They expressed their rejection of that ideology in artistic expression that appeared to reject logic and embrace chaos and irrationality.” For example, George Grosz later recalled that his Dadaist art was intended as a protest “against this world of mutual destruction.”

Dadaists rebelled against what modern society and culture were. Dada was not art. It was anti-art. “According to its proponents, Dada was not art—it was ‘anti-art’ in the sense that Dadaists protested the contemporary academic and cultured values of art.” The intent of Dada was to “destroy traditional culture and aesthetics.” The Dada movement, more than an antiwar protest movement, popularized the absurd, not simply in art but in everything. Schaeffer concludes: “Dada carried to its logical conclusion the notion of all having come about by chance; the result was the final absurdity of everything, including humanity.”

Schaeffer concludes this section of art as a vehicle of Modern Thought by reviewing the progression of philosophical thought and its interweaving with art. “the philosophers from Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard onward, having lost their hope of a unity of knowledge and a unity of life, presented a fragmented conception of reality; then the artists painted that way. It was the artist, however, who first understood that the end of this view was the absurdity of all things.” This is the way “the concept of fragmented reality spread in the twentieth century. The philosophers first formulated intellectually what the artists later depicted artistically.”

Perhaps the most widely popular method of spreading the message of modern thought has been music. Schaeffer believes Beethoven and his The Last Quartets were the doorway to modern music. The influence of the “quartets” was obvious in the two streams of classical music that evolved from them: the German and the French. Beethoven’s influence is seen in those that followed him: Wagner, Mahler and
Schoenberg.

It is with Arnold Schoenberg's (1874–1951) that we come into the music which became the "vehicle for modern thought." Schoenberg, an Austrian and later American Composer, is "associated with the expressionist movements in early 20th-century German poetry and art, and he was among the first composers to embrace atonal motivic development." Schoenberg was best known for his twelve-tone technique. The compositional technique involving tone rows was a rejection of the past tradition in music. Schaeffer tells us: "This was 'modern' in that there was perpetual variation with no resolution." Schaeffer highlights the difference in resolution between Bach and Schoenberg. Schoenberg's music with no resolution "stands in sharp contrast to Bach who, on his biblical base, had much diversity but always resolution. Bach's music had resolution because as a Christian he believed that there will be resolution both for each individual life and for history. As the music which came out of the biblical teaching of the Reformation was shaped by that worldview, so the worldview of modern man shapes modern music."

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was the most important French composer of the early twentieth century. As Schaeffer suggests "His direction was not so much that of nonresolution but of fragmentation." Debussy's importance comes in that he "opened the door to fragmentation in music and influenced most composers since, not only in classical music but in popular music and rock as well. Even the music that is one of the glories of America--black jazz and black spirituals--was gradually infiltrated."

The fragmentation in music is parallel to the fragmentation which occurred in painting. The fragmentation in music and in painting were not only changes in techniques but an expression of the worldview of the artists and in turn brought this worldview to people throughout the world. Art and music brought a worldview of fragmentation and abstraction to people who would never have opened a book of philosophy, or would have had any interest in a "worldview." Popular music beginning with some elements of rock in the 60s carried its message of fragmentation to the young people of the world. Music has become the universal language of the world and with it, this message of fragmentation and abstraction.

Besides music and painting, poetry, drama, literature, and films have also carried these ideas to the world. With the coming of the internet and world communications the message has become one that continually bombard us—"shouting at us a fragmented view of the universe and of life." The most successful vehicle for proclaiming the message of fragmentation came in films. Schaeffer observes: "The important concepts of philosophy increasingly began to come not as formal statements of philosophy but rather as expressions in art, music, novels, poetry, drama, and the cinema." As our culture becomes more visual we see (pun intended) more and more "major philosophic statements . . . made through films." Philosophers are no longer found in academe, today. They are more likely found directing or producing movies with "a message." And more than likely the message is "absurd," abstract and fragmented.
What do the movies “the Deer Hunter,” “The Departed,” “Midnight Cowboy,” “Unforgiven,” “American Beauty,” and “Silence of the Lambs” share? Yes, they won an academy award for Best Picture—but what was the message that they conveyed to their worldwide audiences? What is the purpose of adult movie such as “Golden Compass” being advertised as a child’s movie? And we have not even addressed television! Seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day we are overloaded with a humanistic worldview. A worldview that is without hope, without answers, and is becoming more and more absurd. Schaeffer warns: “Modern people are in trouble indeed. These things are not shut up within the art museums, the concert halls and rock festivals, the stage and movies, or the theological seminaries. People function on the basis of their worldview.” Is there any wonder “that it is unsafe to walk at night through the streets of today’s cities?” “As a man thinketh, so is he.”