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Kanye West and Modernism: In Defense of Yeezus



Yeezus

The title of this article may be a bit presumptuous. *Yeezus*, Kanye West's sixth studio album, released in the summer of 2013, hardly needs any *defense*. According to Metacritic, *Yeezus* was the most critically successful album of 2013, reaching number one in several "best" lists. It received rave reviews from the Los Angeles Times, Pitchfork, Spin, Rolling Stone, almost every music critic, with even a positive nod from the late Lou Reed. And certainly West doesn't want any help, whose bombastic track "I Am a God" boasts "Soon as they like you make 'em unlike you."

And yet, *Yeezus* drew mixed reactions from his fanbase, the public, due to its dark and experimental departure from West's earlier work. Primarily a

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something much harsher, grittier, and angrier than any of his previous work. Yeezus is a minimalist piece of hip-hop, especially compared to the maximalist *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, West's ambitious and opulent album, released in 2010, and especially compared to popular contemporary music in general, and to those less willing to understand West's lofty objectives, *Yeezus* certainly seems to be his most egotistical work.

In a statement made in a [New York Times interview](#), West explained that he discovered his obsession with minimalism after repeatedly visiting the Louvre while recording in Paris. In particular, he describes a Le Corbusier lamp as his greatest inspiration, a comment that received both laudatory approval and internet derision.

Le Corbusier, born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris in 1887, was a Swiss pioneer of modern architecture, design, and urban planning. Constantly trying to tackle the spread of urbanization and the growing number of slums, Le Corbusier is most remembered and celebrated (and criticized) for his almost utopian urban planning. A skyscraper-sized apartment building without ornament, Le Corbusier believed, would be a housing solution that would end crowding and dirtiness, and lead to better living conditions, though his critics often found them boring and unfriendly. Le Corbusier is known for his Villa Savoye, a modernist villa outside of Paris. Built in the late 1920s, it is one of the most famous buildings of the International Style.

Le Corbusier is also well known for his simple, modernist furniture designs. While the exact lamp West described is unknown, one can get an idea of the lamp and what attracted West to it through an understanding of Le

influence from an art that is so far removed from popular music as a “Le Corbusier lamp.”



Villa Savoye

For West’s detractors, his statement is an egotistical one, a meaningless and childish attempt at “creating high art.” But when one listens to *Yeezus* and hears something so distinctly different from West’s previous work, one has to wonder where that change came from. There is something unmistakably modernist about *Yeezus*, with a clear focus on minimalism and raw energy.

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy is an absolute experience. It is one of the largest hip-hop albums of all time, one of the most well-produced crystalline pieces of contemporary music, an all-encompassing grandiose work of art and entertainment. For West, the album is the pinnacle of a lineage of hip-hop emerging from West’s *The College Dropout*, his debut album, a highly-produced, well versed, poignant, mostly radio friendly lineage.

After *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, there was nothing left for West to pursue in this direction. It would not be a stretch to parallel West between *Dark Fantasy* and *Yeezus* and the struggle of modern art, the struggle to reinvent the western tradition, to both strangle and rebirth it. For the early

such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud and painters like Manet and Gauguin, and later, Picasso, Braque, and those that followed, sought to redefine art's place in society. Essentially, all modern art is about itself.

Yeezus is an attempt to redefine beauty in hip-hop and in contemporary music in general. West's disillusionment with popular music and popular attitudes mirrors the avant-garde's disillusionment with tradition and desire for radical change. *Yeezus* is minimal, grittier, louder, and grungier, an anti-*Dark Fantasy*, because, West knew, everything in that genre of hip-hop had been done already.

Modern art and in particular modern architecture and design has always been associated with revolution, from the anti-historicism and speed of the Italian futurists to the overtly Communist constructivists of Russia. Modern architecture generally concerns a simplification of form, an absence of ornamentation, and usually, an idea of social reform. Some of the most famous modern architects are Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, American darling Frank Lloyd Wright, and, of course, Le Corbusier. Strangely, even in contemporary society, modern architecture is still viewed as somewhat radical. It is often associated with socialism and radical reform and the new, as democracy has clearly sided with neoclassical architecture. Interestingly, Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, designer of Brasilia, Brazil's planned capital, designed the United Nations headquarters, which is in itself a symbol of world peace and utopianism.



Le Corbusier Interior

Yeezus, likewise, is a call to revolution in design and in society. It is simple to spot modern architecture's characteristics in West's music here. The concept of "truth to materials," which refers to modern architecture's refusal to conceal the natural appearance of materials, is rampant on *Yeezus*. Unlike the highly produced albums prior, with the endless lists of famous guest appearances, long, well acted skits, and sonic maximalism, *Yeezus* is a bare bones hip-hop album. It features a small cast of unknown rappers, such as King Louie, from West's native Chicago, and the only track with the word "featuring" attached to it is "I Am a God," which is "featuring God." Compare this to *Dark Fantasy*, which lists Kid Cudi, Jay-Z, Rick Ross, Nicki Minaj, Bon Iver, Pusha T, and John Legend, among others, in the track listing.

West's goal with *Yeezus* was not to simply make the largest, most produced, most expensive album he could, but instead to create something more direct, musically and thematically, and with much less glitz. West's industrial and acid house beats, which can again be linked back to West's native Chicago, are as far as the artist could be from his well-layered, radio-popular, smooth tracks of old. There's a simple, almost tribal aggression in "Black Skinhead," "I Am a God," and "New Slaves," and oftentimes, especially on the latter track, West's voice will only be accompanied by a simple beat or a slight void of silence.

Most important, and most likely what West took away from the Le Corbusier lamp in question, is a simplicity and clarity of form and the

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utilizes his trademark oddball samples, but there are lessons Yeezus, and they are much less explosive here. West uses repetition of simple beats, and many of them are scratchy, hard, and unlike anything in popular music.

The machine aesthetic of modern architecture can also be heard in these primarily electronic beats. Many tracks on Yeezus incorporate a distorted, glitchy drum machine and West utilizes auto-tune to pixelate and distort human voices instead of making them sound “better.” Although Le Corbusier’s notion of minimalism was for a pleasing and utopian end, West’s minimalism is abrasive and aggressively off-putting. Le Corbusier and modern architecture’s influence on Yeezus are clear, but Kanye West is an artist of a different ilk, and an artist from an entirely different era.



My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy

Dark Fantasy featured a series of different album covers, each painted by contemporary George Condo for the album, one of which was controversial enough to be banned from stores. The large number of paintings circulating for the album’s cover perfectly fit into its central themes of decadence, excess, consumer culture, wealth, and self doubt, with West himself scrambling to own and brand as much art as possible. Art becomes a commodity and a luxury, an addiction, and the more the better.

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of red tape, neatly squared as if it were part of a Mondrian painting. The lack of cover art allows the sheen of the disc to be seen, harkening back to the “truth to materials” seen in modern architecture.

It could be argued that West’s connection to modernism and Le Corbusier is a meaningless link, that West’s statement is merely the pretentious words of an ego maniac. But this notion is misguided. It had previously been pointed out to me by a friend that West’s fascination and obsession with art and the history of culture is akin to “a kid in a candy store.” Art and culture sparks something in West’s mind, and that is a great thing. West, who is the master of controversy, from the Hurricane Katrina telethon to the 2009 VMAs, would fit right in with art history’s biggest scandal makers.

Kanye West is akin to enfant terrible Arthur Rimbaud, Igor Stravinsky, whose ballet *The Rite of Spring* incited a riot during its premier, and the Dadaists, whose leader, Tristan Tzara, was the original bad boy scandal maker and wager of cultural warfare. In our post-post-modern world, we have forgotten that art and the new is supposed to shock as much as it reforms, and that the best art is often controversial. *Yeezus* is certainly a shocking album. And while West’s contemporary Jay-Z increasingly raps about finding contentment, West grows more frustrated with each album. He pushes himself further with each step in his career and continues to experiment and invent.

Kanye West is a great artist because he is never satisfied.

What do you think? [Leave a comment.](#)



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