

Editorial: Special Issue on “Revisiting Modernism”

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By shifting the centre of gravity from author to reader, Roland Barthes had certainly prepared us for a Copernican turn in aesthetics, yet Michael J. Pearce’s *Art in the Age of Emergence* still sounds unfamiliar two years after its publication. While acknowledging the existence of homologies among the art objects of a cultural phase, the Californian academic also launches an explanatory hypothesis: “I realized that in order to understand art, instead of looking for the similarities between the paintings and the sculptures we have to look at the similarities between the people looking at them. Art is better explained by looking at how the mind works than by looking at the products of mind.” (XV). The substitution of the phenomenology of mind for the phenomenology of the work of art can only have a partial contribution to the understanding of period terms, yet not devoid of relevance. The numerous studies in modernism published of late, for instance, are revisionary, the changing views being motivated by the new historical context rather than by a new assessment of forms. The mind turns out to be working according to the critical theory it has been exposed to or which it has freely embraced.

Relegated to the status of socio-political movement without aesthetic significance since 1939, when Clement Greenberg associated it with kitsch, to Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger or Christopher Butler (*Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916, 1994*), the avant-garde came to be enshrined as the weightiest artistic phenomenon and “the last post of modernism” by Richard Sheppard in *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism* (2000), who joined thus a new party of postmodern critics, among whom, Linda Hutcheon, who see the historical avant-garde as the generative matrix of the post-war literature in the 50s and the 60s, stretching the term to include the French *nouveau roman* or the *Tel Quel*. Quoted by Sheppard on Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* being “the first great modernist work of art”, Marshall Berman (*All That Is Solid Melts into Air, 1982*) too welcomes modernism into the sixties and seventies. Titles, such as, *Avant Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now*, by Brandon Taylor, have tilted the scales measuring modernism against the avant-garde into a more balanced position, even if also the leads of the earlier twentieth century have been the object of New-Historicist and culturalist approaches that corrected the *Axel Castle* icon of egocentric aloofness through readings that evinced the substantial presence of history in the writings of Woolf, Joyce or D. H. Lawrence.

With interdisciplinarity the latest buzz word in the academic world, lots of studies have been dedicated to the influence of Non-Euclidian Geometry, relativity and quantum physics on modernist art, for instance, *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science. Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* by Gavin Parkinson (2008).

The most spectacular renovation has probably been undergone by no other than Charles Baudelaire, the founding father, who has been removed from his site with transcendent flavours and symbolic correspondences and inserted into the phantasmagoric pre-cinematic media world: Marit Grotta: *Baudelaire’s Media Aesthetics (The Gaze of the Flâneur and 19-th Century Media)*. If we travel back in time to get a feeling of what modernists saw in each other and compare their

vision with such contemporary framing, we realize to what extent the history of reception modifies the history of composition. Mina Loy's ekphrasis of sculptor Brancusi's Golden Bird, for instance, conveys the modernist artist's infatuation with archetypes, tropes of immaculate conception, "breast of revelation" or hyperaesthesia – the alchemy whereby the senses projected a secondary reality of mixed perceptions.

Is there a possibility to negotiate meanings when talking to the dead, as Stephen Greenblatt has put it in the opening of *Shakespearean Negotiations*? Used also by Ayendy Bonifacio in his essay on Hart Crane, "interliterariness" is a middle-European term for what Russian semioticians or French and American social critics or American New Historicists had already attempted to achieve: an archeology of meaning, a history and a philosophy of culture that help the visitor of past ages assess meaning and value. The more elements of a culture's codes are absorbed into an art object, the more representative and valuable is its testimony in the history of the spirit. Understanding such "serious and heavy" codes, as Pound dubbed them, takes longer, studies of a work's genealogy bringing it to light in all its complexity. The history of literature is replete with such novae, Irish Flann O'Brien, whose works are an ark of his time's literary, aesthetic, scientific or political ideas, is the revelation of the last decade, emerging almost out of anonymity thanks to systematic research initiated by a team coordinated by Professor Werner Huber from the University of Vienna.

Whether the Virgilian guide be New Historicist Greenblatt, or, as suggested by Professor Sachin C. Ketkar in his essay, Lotman's semiotics or Dionyz Durisin's study of the discursive exchanges of semantic energy across national boundaries, it becomes possible, for instance, to read Mardhekar in the context of the international modernist movements and in light of "interliterary 'genetic-contactual relations' instead of the idea of 'influence' which invariably brings in normative hierarchy between the influencer and the influenced, placing the latter on a lower or secondary position."

In the beginning, building international communities was indeed a matter of hierarchies of power. Japan or China were forced to open their harbours to international trade, coming out of their ancestral isolation, while the Macaulay law forced Indians into chimeric native bodies and English minds. Merchants or colonizers, however, opened the way to enlightened politicians, scientists or artists. In his *History of Romanian Civilization*, Eugen Lovinescu, critic and editor of the earlier twentieth century, distinguishes between evolutionary and revolutionary models of culture. The major cultures know a continuous and organic growth, whereas minor ones, lured by centres of influence, break off abruptly from their traditions borrowing foreign models. That is why it is easy to date period terms in the latter, whereas the former have very discreet lines of demarcation. Ezra Pound's manifesto of imagism, for instance, is heavily indebted to Alfred Binet's model of reasoning through associations of images instead of syllogisms, but ahead of Binet there was Herbart, and before Herbart, Kant, who had borrowed ideas for his *Anthropology* from David Hume ...

It is again the constitution of homologues across disciplinary spheres and reciprocal loans that allow an observer to identify a territorialization, as Deleuze calls it, that is, a distinct type of culture.

Politically speaking, modernism begins with Baudelaire's declaration of war on the bourgeois: "Vous êtes la majorité, – nombre et intelligence ; – donc vous êtes la force, – qui est la justice." (You are the majority - in number and intelligence; therefore you are the force – which is justice – *Salon de 1846*). With its nomination of the working class as being entitled to lead the other social classes – which they did when they had the chance – Marx's *Capital* meant even less

democracy than the bourgeois republic. The modernist political discourse was one of individualism and human rights, built on Jefferson’s model. It is this fascinating rebel against hypocritical social conventions that still appeals to the nonconformist youth cultures, Shweta Basu undertaking a study in the translation of “Flowers of Evil” across cultures and media in a Japanese *manga* series.

Modernism saw the collapse of dynasties, and the foundation of international leagues of nations enjoying equal rights or of clubs of the intellectual elites of all nations (PEN CLUB). E. M. Forster was writing in 1938: “I believe in aristocracy . . . Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky.” Under the circumstances of huge differences in point of civilization – Bipin Balachandran mentions the case of Poland and other middle and East-European countries – but capitalizing on the widely circulated narrative of the superiority of culture over civilization, which was considered to be rapidly changing into a soulless machinery, individual contacts of scholars or artists contributed to the emergence of a truly international spirit and a cosmopolitan culture.

By contrast, the eighteenth century had thrived on models of justified hierarchies (the best of all possible worlds), colonizing missions, histories of empires to learn from them the rise to international power. The systematic oppositions we can establish between the Enlightenment and modernism prevent us from merging them into “a singular modernity” (Frederic Jameson).

The culture of modernism is a hybrid one, with metropolitan cultures fascinated by the new nations they were put in contact with, open to the foreigners who sought them out to study or pursue a career. Japanese art was studied and imitated, while the interest in India, aroused by the discovery of the common origin of Indo-European languages, by Schopenhauer’s philosophy or by Madame Balavatsky’s esoteric pursuits, emulated by the British and the Americans alike, reached such proportions that references to India almost became a sign of recognition. Even quantum physics pioneers, Heisenberg and Schrödinger, owed a debt to Hindu mythology and the Indian logic of the included third. Naturally possessed of this mindset, physicist Satyendra Nath Bose initiated calculations of a new state of condensed matter, where atoms lose their identity reaching the peace of a frozen quantum state of superimposed waves. The experiment is known as the Bose-Einstein condensate.

A very fashionable topic of research nowadays, the search for native forms of modernism outside the centrality of Paris, London or New York is usually successful. Paraphrasing, scratch a national culture and you will find traces of modernism. It was not difficult for Rindon Kundu and Saswati Saha to spot out a Wagner in Latin America in the person of Rubén Darío, and even an aesthetic contest between him and Enrique González Martínez, similar to the Wyndham Lewis-Marinetti duel in Europe. For T.S. Eliot, India was a myth of origin from *The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock* to *The Waste Land*. As he confessed in a speech in memory of Rudyard Kipling, the former was inspired by *The Love Song of Har Dyal*. Eliot’s protagonist is spiritually impoverished, frustrated by lack, not of love affairs but of strong feelings, like those that give lovers the courage to risk their lives in the Indian story. Anindita Mukherjee chooses another contextualization, out of many possible, as is the case with the erudite modernists, and that is Rilke’s thoughts on love disclosed to a young poet who had asked him for advice. In that letter, Rilke says that dragons are but princesses who want to see their lovers courageous. Prufrock is acutely aware of his inferiority in relation to bright, cultivated women, who comment on his weakness, while the imagery surrounding them suggests the strength of warrior-women (*And I have known the arms already, known them all— /Arms that are braceleted*). The essayist notices though the redemption of the protagonist, his final capacity to dismiss his daily routine as rubbish and reach for transcendence.

Sumi Bora looks into textual traces of the relationship between the poet and his rhetorical masks, interrogating the status of the authorial figure and biography in the modernist text.

The web of mythic allusions in *The Waste Land* is a familiar feature of the modernist agenda "to seek reality and justice in a single vision (Yeats).

Nisarga Bhattacharjee and Ananya Chatterjee write on the modernists' use of myth as part of the mythopoetic tradition, blooming into extended metaphors of life or of the human condition, while Susan Haris is plumbing into the symbolism of unconscious drives and identification with elementary nature in D.H. Lawrence's personal version of psychoanalysis. The figural psyche of modernist fiction and the gendered landscape of female isolation is Lava Asaad's focus on the early modernist career of Jean Rhys, better known for her postcolonial rewriting of *Jane Eyre*.

Is there an aesthetic continuity between the historical avant-garde and the Beat Generation or the abstract expressionism in the 50s and 60s? Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery or Lawrence Ferlinghetti engage often in dialogue with precedent canonical texts, their intertexts sinning on the side of courteous attitudes to tradition, which does not fit into the context of Marinetti's dismissal of libraries, academies and museums (*The Futurist Manifesto*). Abstract art is, obviously, something different from found objects, while, in critical theory, the fifties and the sixties saw the rise of semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, that is, of the very practice of interdisciplinarity in literary criticism, something at the other pole from New Criticism and other formalisms in which ended up structuralism.

Although not irrelevant in point of aesthetic achievement, Ayendy Bonifacio writing persuasively on Hart Crane's constructivist rhetoric, the avant-garde is still perceived as a self-standing chapter in the cultural history of modernism.

The exchange of cultural narratives and traditions, fostered by historical circumstances but also by Worringer's aesthetics that praised primitive art for its tendencies towards abstraction in flight from a threatening and alien nature, that could provide a spiritual cure to a materialistic civilization, was defining for the poetics of art at the turn of the last century. Modernism was humanity's first coming together.

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