A Handbook of Modernism Studies
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Jean-Michel Rabaté
Contents

Notes on Contributors vii

Introduction 1
Jean-Michel Rabaté

1 Hard and Soft Modernism: Politics as “Theory” 15
Peter Nicholls

2 Streams Beyond Consciousness: Stylistic Immediacy in the Modernist Novel 35
Vicki Mahaffey

3 Modernisms High and Low 55
Eric Bulson

4 Kafka, Modernism, and Literary Theory 75
Vivian Liska

5 Race: Tradition and Archive in the Harlem Renaissance 87
Jeremy Braddock

6 Empire, Imperialism, and Modernism 107
John Marx

7 Marxist Modernisms: From Jameson to Benjamin 123
Catherine Flynn

8 Reactionary Modernism 139
Robert L. Caserio

9 Transnationalism at the Departure Gate 157
Matthew Hart
## Contents

10 From Ritual to the Archaic in Modernism: Frazer, Harrison, Freud, and the Persistence of Myth  
*Shanyn Fiske*  
173

11 Modernism, Orientalism, and East Asia  
*Christopher Bush*  
193

12 Translation Studies and Modernism  
*Steven G. Yao*  
209

13 Modernism, Mind, and Manuscripts  
*Dirk Van Hulle*  
225

14 Modernism and Visual Culture  
*Laura Marcus*  
239

15 More Kicks than Pricks: Modernist Body-Parts  
*Maud Ellmann*  
255

16 Materialities of Modernism: Objects, Matter, Things  
*Bill Brown*  
281

17 Glamour’s Silhouette: Fashion, Fashun, and Modernism  
*Judith Brown*  
297

18 Otherness and Singularity: Ethical Modernism  
*Marian Eide*  
313

19 Phenomenology and Affect: Modernist Sulking  
*Sara Crangle*  
327

20 Queer Modernism  
*Benjamin Kahan*  
347

21 Cultural Capital and the Revolutions of Literary Modernity, from Bourdieu to Casanova  
*James F. English*  
363

22 Modernism and Cognitive Disability: A Genealogy  
*Joseph Valente*  
379

23 From Parody to the Event; from Affect to Freedom: Observations on the Feminine Sublime in Modernism  
*Ewa Plonowska Ziarek*  
399

24 Aesthetic Formalism, the Form of Artworks, and Formalist Criticism  
*Jonathan Loesberg*  
415

25 Rancière’s Aesthetic Regime: Modernism, Politics, and the Logic of Excess  
*Molly Anne Rothenberg*  
431

Index  
445
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Notes on Contributors

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Introduction

Jean-Michel Rabaté

One often hears the complaint that Theory has had a negative impact on students interested in English and American literature: the lure of Theory with a capital T tempts them to read philosophers they are ill-equipped to understand, and they neglect the patient close reading of literary texts that once defined competence in the field of literary studies. True or not, the reproach has never been valid for students who have decided to focus on modernism, since from the very constitution of modernism as a literary field – say, since the end of WWII – the interpenetration of theory and texts has been its dominant feature. Today, with the rapid growth of modernist studies, the field has been inflected by historical or historicist studies; at the same time, the interconnection between literature and theory has not lost its appeal, urgency, and productivity.

The canonization of modernism by poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, by literary critics such as Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff, art critics like Clement Greenberg, and philosophers like Adorno, has always implied concepts and criteria that correspond with the main tenets of what is now recognized as Theory. As a precise example, I will discuss Greenberg’s dependence on Kant’s philosophy for his imposition of an American modernism as a new and dogmatic rationale for the aesthetics of the new. The emergence of high modernism in literature, architecture, film, and the other visual arts could not have happened without significant borrowing from philosophers’ theories: Yeats’s version of Irish modernism would have been unthinkable without Nietzsche; Eliot’s anti-Romantic and neoclassical bias obscure his reliance on the neo-Hegelian Bradley as well as his readings of Husserl and Bertrand Russell; Beckett discovered in Descartes and then Geulinx philosophical sensibilities akin to his; T. E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis meditated on Bergson’s philosophy before criticizing it; Virginia Woolf and the whole Bloomsbury group...
Jean-Michel Rabaté

paid attention to the redefinition of philosophy as logical theory brought about by Moore and Bertrand Russell. Even before the New Critics in America and F. R. Leavis in England put authors like Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence on the map of academic curricula, most modernist authors knew that their success would depend on their ability to create their own audiences, to explain what they were doing, and to durably transform the taste of the common reader. This they did by introducing the terms in which they wanted to be read. If notions such as “epiphany,” “mood,” or “objective correlative” have now lost much of their relevance and turned into academic clichés, we should not forget that they were effective in shaping certain habits of reading and promoting intellectual discernment. Joyce, for instance, always struck his friends by the passion with which he followed the dissemination of his texts via critics who could provide new concepts for further discussion (“plane of meaning,” “new mythos,” and “language of the night” were not canonized but proved effective in that endeavor).

In a similar manner, the aim of this collection is to help students who want a better grasp on major modernist texts to make sense of the conceptual, philosophical, and theoretical terms that underpin the efforts of writers like Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), Franz Kafka, Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, to name but some of the most obvious suspects. All the contributors to the collection have distinguished themselves in the two aspects of modernist scholarship I have outlined: they have written monographs or detailed analyses of individual texts and also provided broader syntheses. Each has engaged with concepts, theories, and theoreticians while discussing the writings of major modernist authors.

The affinity of visible theoreticians for modernist texts is well known; one can think of Adorno and Beckett, Derrida and Joyce, Foucault and Borges, Jameson and Wyndham Lewis, Cixous and Lispector, Deleuze and Proust, Žižek and Kafka, de Man and Yeats, to mention just essays or books written on individual authors. There are also many hidden or latent links, as when one parallels Derrida’s work on “difference” with Beckett’s interrogations of the voice and writing,1 or refer Deleuze’s and Guattari’s critique of psychoanalysis back to D. H. Lawrence’s essays and novels. And even if Virginia Woolf stated that she was not a feminist, one wonders what feminist theory would be today without her groundbreaking texts.

The excellent conversations about the links between modernism and theory gathered by Stephen Ross in Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate in 2009 have highlighted numerous aesthetic and methodological parallels. The discussions have assessed the role of theory in contemporary interpretations of modernism, providing numerous examples of intersections between modernist authors and theoretical problematics. In a similar fashion, this collection of newly commissioned essays will explore the use of contemporary critical theory in the study of modernism. It will probe the ways in which the modernist period (its peak being in the second and third decades of the twentieth century) can serve as a site for interrogating and reframing the practices of scholars and theorists. In our current conversation about modernism, no one has done more to promote the interaction between theory and the cultural
Introduction

3

historiography of the “modern moment” than Walter Benjamin. It is no coincidence that his essays and books have been cornerstones of definitions of modernism.

Indeed, Benjamin’s main effort, his unfinished compendium called The Arcades Project for want of a final title, keeps delineating the fault-lines between modernity and modernism. Benjamin was not duped by the shrill claims of recent authors to be “absolutely modern” (a task that Rimbaud had argued would loom larger at the end of the nineteenth century). He notes wryly that each epoch believes itself to be at the vanguard of the modern: “Each age unavoidably seems to itself a new age. The ‘modern’ (das ‘Moderne’) however, is as varied in its meaning as the different aspects of one and the same kaleidoscope.” Benjamin is less asserting a reshuffling of moving elements caught up in a machine to imply that variety merely veils sameness, than quoting obliquely Baudelaire’s famous phrase comparing the new subject of modernity to a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness.” This phrase would provide a good description of what this collection would aim to be: an accretive and dialogic immersion in a domain that will be explored through multiple angles and points of view. This is also how Baudelaire defined the rapture of the subject of modernity, a new “man of the crowd,” as Poe saw him, who is also a “lover of universal life” joyfully entering the mass of urban passersby in order to tap this “immense reservoir of electrical energy.” Benjamin meditates at length on Baudelaire’s concept of modernity, and brings it into close connection with the two important philosophies of history of the nineteenth century, those of Hegel and Marx. In the same chapter, he quotes Roger Caillois in French about Paris, this “modern myth.” Caillois states that “modernity” (modernité) implies the “elevation of urban life to the level of myth” (AP, 555, PW, 689), a feature that we would tend to associate with Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, but was surely present in Baudelaire. Is this a sign that modernité has insensibly led us to modernism? We could believe this when we reach this isolated sentence, a simple question: “How does modernism become Jugendstil?” (AP. 561, PW, 697).

Here, one should pay attention to a subtle shift in gender: what the translators have correctly translated as “modernism” is not in the neutral as before (das Moderne) but in the singular feminine, die Moderne. Benjamin also uses the term Neuheit (translated as “Novelty”), or the “New,” but not yet the masculine term of Modernismus. Beyond arbitrary grammatical rules (in French, for instance, we have the masculine modernité and the feminine modernisme, yet their mythical qualities, the hardness of the masculine and the softness of femininity, have been exchanged), one may ask more pointedly what is the “gender of modernism.” This is a question that several contributors will tackle in this collection, since there was a sense that the “high modernism” had to be masculine, hence “hard,” aggressive, ferocious even, against an effeminate culture of decadence, or even worse, the production of mass culture for a dominantly feminine audience, allegedly the consumers of popular novels. Yet, within the field of modernist theory, a number of authors like Peter Bürger (who will be discussed in these pages) argued that modernism had kept elements of the “soft” aestheticizing touch, whereas the real revolution in the arts and everyday life was to be found only in the “historical” avant-gardes. This is a
debate that will be surveyed here. We can also remember that, not so long ago, such an influential critic as Hugh Kenner refused to grant the epithet of “modernist” to Virginia Woolf, who was deemed too “soft” and not experimental enough, reserving the term to the group animated by Ezra Pound, a group including, it is true, Hilda Doolittle alias H. D. And Gertrude Stein could state that all geniuses were men – which included her as well! In all these discussions, gender and politics are inextricably mixed.

As for Benjamin, his use of a feminine term (die Moderne) may be linked with what he criticized in the “Jugendstil” moment, a movement which is often rendered in English as “art nouveau.” It is the post-symbolist generation of 1890–1910, the lineage linking Baudelaire to Mallarmé, Laforgue, Wilde, Jarry, the younger Gide and Yeats. Odilon Redon and Beardsley would be its main artists. Needless to say, Benjamin, who embraced the material, technological, and ideological acceleration of modernity, cannot but reject the legacy of the Jugendstil, a movement that he always associated with the decadent poetry of Stefan George, with whom he had fought at the beginning of his career. Sexual perversion and fake mysticism are the ways in which Jugendstil would attempt to bring back a lost aura: “Jugendstil forces the aурatic” (AP, 557, PW, 692). In other words, we see here that Benjamin points to possible links between modernism and regressive aestheticism, which leads to stillborn productions or bad art, simply put, to Kitsch. This will provide an exactly identical point of departure for Clement Greenberg.

What remains of Clement Greenberg’s impact today is that he succeeded in promoting modernism in the visual arts after 1945, and justified his preference by establishing a solid theory of modernism. For this he had to invent a specific blend of philosophy, cultural critique, and aesthetics that corresponds rather well with what we understand by “Theory.” Like Benjamin, Greenberg was struck by the cultural scandal constituted by the coexistence of “Kitsch,” or debased popular art in all its commercial dilutions, with high art. Avant-garde or modern art and Kitsch not only rubbed shoulders in the marketplace, but reinforced each another. Thus only clear and precise sets of criteria will allow one to make necessary distinctions. In his inaugural essay on “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg asserts that “. . . with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.” Two “etceteras” call up the bad infinity of Kitsch, the endless tide of debased objects that threatens to engulf the authenticity of modern art. In order to ward off this threat, often identified with the market or capitalism, it is vital to define strictly the conditions of possibility of true artistic judgments. One will have to distinguish between a priori conditions of any artistic experience and the value judgments that underpin it so as to build foundations for an accurate appreciation of taste.

Quite naturally, this position led Greenberg back to Kant, a philosopher whose concepts proved invaluable if one searched for a secure foundation in aesthetics.
Greenberg was a hero of theoretical modernism, but he had a darker side, above all the fact that he appeared as a theoretical bully. He did not hesitate to knock out an aged Max Ernst who had poured on the critic’s bald head an ashtray full of cigarette butts; Ernst’s silly joke meant to allude to a consecration as King of Critics. Greenberg’s answer was to punch him in the face, to Ernst’s infinite amazement. Modernism would only accept titles granted by itself; one would have to fight to uphold the “autonomy” of judgment. Indeed, Greenberg insisted that criticism is based on judgments, which led him to place modernism durably in the context of neo-Kantianism. Thierry de Duve points out some equivocations in the appropriation of Kant in *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines,* but on the whole attests to the seriousness of his critical discourse. For de Duve, Greenberg appeared first as a doctrinaire and a militant, a committed ideologist who managed, almost single-handedly, to change American taste in contemporary art; evolving from a Trotskyite avant-garde entrenched in little New York magazines, in a decade he reached the envied position of Pope of Abstract Expressionism. A second aspect defines the daily practice of an art reviewer whose journalistic forays into galleries responded to the solicitations of the art scene; there he displays an extraordinary virtuosity in reviews in which he would “discover” artists such as Pollock and Still while attacking the French like Rouault or the Surrealists; he was an “eye,” a witness whose curiosity was always on the alert. The third aspect of Greenberg may interest us here: the theoretician who elaborated a comprehensive doctrine of modernism, and who can be called an “author,” or, as Michel Foucault has it, an “inventor of discursivity.” Still today, “Greenberg” as a name stands for theoretical modernism and thus condenses a whole set of values, analyses, and appreciations.

Greenberg’s problematic of modernism started, as we have seen, from the fruitful opposition between Kitsch and the avant-garde, and it ended up promoting the New York school of abstraction in the 1950s because this school embodied what his aesthetics promoted. The reference to Kant in connection with the promotion of Abstract Expressionism corresponded to a strategy that was meant to debunk two rival theories: a parochial praise of American values, in which he recognized the language of exceptionalism and jingoism, and the blurred messianic promise of an avant-gardist internationalism. Greenberg used Kant selectively: for instance, he never invoked the theory of the Sublime in his aesthetics (to which several contributors will allude). He does not seem to pay attention to the passage of the *Third Critique* when Kant praises the Jewish religion’s prohibition of human representation, although this could point to non-representational painting. In fact, Greenberg heeds takes the axiom that “The Deduction of aesthetic judgments upon objects of nature must not be directed to what we call sublime in nature, but only to the beautiful.” The main concepts used to promote modernism are the idea of a Critique, of the Beautiful, and of Taste as a common discourse on art.

In 1946, when the New York school was emerging, Greenberg used Kant’s philosophy in order to debunk American provincialism, as he did in a review of McMahon’s *Preface to an American Philosophy of Art* (1945). McMahon thought that he could “demolish” the German school of aesthetics by seizing on a contradiction
between Kant’s idea that “Nature is beautiful because it looks like art,” an idea that would suggest that art must imitate nature, and the idea that Beauty has nothing to do with Truth (CE II, 66). Greenberg has no difficulty in demonstrating that Kant never posits the imitation of nature as an ideal. Kant states only that art’s finality has to be like that of Nature: its forms must be free of constraints, devoid of arbitrary rules. As Greenberg points out, Kant’s “revolutionary insights” were trivialized by McMahon who reduced them to a self-canceling plea for mimesis (CE II, 66). Such a forcible critique testifies to the seriousness of his reading of Kant. At the same time, Greenberg similarly reproached Claude-Edmonde Magny for not having understood Kant. Her 1945 book Les Sandales d’Empédocle refuses the “fiction” of a universal point of view and questions the possibility of proffering general aesthetic judgments. Greenberg sees her contradiction: hasn’t she made a judgment herself when she debated about the limits of literature? (CE II, 68). This implies that we are all Kantian, even without knowing it: as soon as we talk about art, we cannot help making a judgment. Finally, Ernst Cassirer emerges as a model of intelligent Kantianism open both to Geisteswissenschaften and to the analysis of language and symbols (CE II, 27). Greenberg’s concept of modernism goes back to the program of the Enlightenment. Here is how “Modernist Painting” (1960) begins:

Modernism includes more than art and literature. By now it covers almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture. It happens, however, to be very much of a historical novelty. Western civilization is not the first civilization to turn around and question its own foundations, but it is the one that has gone furthest in doing so. I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist. // The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. (CE IV, 85)

Modernism inherits from the Enlightenment the wish to found each discipline by criticizing it, in a critique that does not come from outside but from inside: “The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly” (CE IV, 86). Consequently, modernism discloses a doctrine of the “purity” of art. Purity based upon “self-definition” depends upon a rigorous deployment of the formal properties of the medium. Cézanne’s revolution came from the exploration of the “limits” of his art, and modernism already began at the end of the nineteenth century.

Kant gives philosophical weight to an insight attributed to Aristotle in “Avant-garde and Kitsch.” If the coexistence of Eliot’s poems and Tin Pan Alley songs created a scandal for Greenberg, he saw in the avant-garde a paradoxical defense of absolute values in art, even if the avant-garde’s origins are historically linked to the
industrial revolution. Yet artists who invoke the absolute prefer certain values to others: "The very values in the name of which he invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God – and here I use ‘imitate’ in its Aristotelian sense – but the discipline and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the ‘abstract.’ In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his own craft” (CE I, 8–9). Greenberg reminds us that, for Aristotle, music is the most “imitative” of all arts, which confirms a link between Aristotle and Kant. Both focus on how the arts imitate the workings of nature (*e techne mimeitai ten phisin*), which does not mean that art should imitate or reproduce natural objects. Joyce had already noted in 1903¹¹ that Aristotle asserts that the “artistic process is like the natural process,” yet does not lead to a doctrine of realist representation. The arts “imitate” by following the “natural” drift of their own process of “imitation”: “Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surface, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors” (CE I, 9). A roll call of modernist poets, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Eluard, Ezra Pound, Crane, Stevens, Rilke, and Yeats, comes to confirm that the same process obtains in literature.

This Aristotelian-Kantian theory will be applied to modernist works, and even re-title some of these as modernist, as we see in Greenberg’s changing opinion on Monet. After having been dismissed, Monet was reassessed more positively by Greenberg later. In “The Later Monet” (1957), Greenberg admits that he was wrong to downplay Monet, even if the painter was mistaken in his understanding of art. For Monet, what mattered above all was to be faithful to Nature, to reproduce as accurately as possible the colored world out there. His genius was to radicalize this wish, and this led him to refuse the Old Masters as models (even Cézanne kept them as models). “In the end he found what he was looking for, which was not so much a new principle as a more comprehensive one: and it lay not in Nature, but in the essence of art itself, in its ‘abstractness.’ That he himself could not consciously recognize or accept ‘abstractness’ – the qualities of the medium alone – as a principle of consistency makes no difference: it is there, plain to see in the paintings of his old age” (CE IV, 8). True to the end to his visual sensations, Monet gave all his attention to problems of equivalences without dominances. He created a superior unity when the colored surfaces turn into flat, unmodulated monochromes. Pissarro could quip that Monet was a “decorator without being decorative.” The truth is that Monet’s later paintings anticipated the wallpaper effect given by the all-over paintings produced by Pollock and other American abstract expressionists.

Thus modernist abstraction insists on the idea of equivalence in difference, an effect produced by the feeling that each brushstroke is autonomous. Every part of the painting embodies the whole (think of the more experimental work of Gertrude Stein). This experimental modernism abolishes hierarchies between high and low, top and bottom, horizontal and vertical, hung or flat, centered or non-centered.
Modernist abstraction is the logical consequence of a process that is the culmination of a historical progress, but it also answers to a theoretical need. The exploration began with Kandinsky, Malevitch, and Mondrian, but the perfect realization of the autonomous medium was left to American artists of the 1950s like Pollock, Rothko, Still, and Newman. Here, Greenberg’s logic is “pœleic,” in the sense that it follows the trope of emphatic repetition. He keeps urging: “Let painting be painting!” This would be true of modernist music and of literature; they too can only progress by exploring the properties of their own mediums.

Greenberg assumes that there has been a historical evolution leading to his sense that the best artists of the 1950s were abstract painters, but he has more difficulties in explaining why in 1953 the New York school (Gorky, Gottlieb, Hofmann, Kline, de Kooning, Motherwell, Newman, Pollock, Rothko) is better than the Parisian school (Fautrier, Dubuffet, Hartung, Tal Coat) who are also abstract. The judgment falls, without equivocation: “Do I mean that the new American abstract painting is superior on the whole to the French? I do” (CE III, 156). French painters have neglected Klee and Miró; they have not learned enough from Matisse; they have little regard for a precursor like Masson. More precisely, the concept of taste intervenes. Thus the Kantian theory of modernism will rely on value judgments based on artistic competence. Greenberg managed to achieve what for Remy de Gourmont was the aim of criticism: to transform one’s personal impressions into universal maxims. Greenberg’s experience, nourished as much by Corot and Velasquez as by Mondrian and Pollock, tells him that in the 1950s the best painters are American abstract painters.

Similarly, Greenberg’s analysis of the failure of the first abstract school of New York is instructive; since it cannot claim to be linked with Kantian concepts, it has to be ideological: “It was this misconception of non-naturalistic art as a vehicle for an esoteric message that encouraged Miss O’Keefe, along with Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and others, to proceed to abstract art so immediately upon her first acquaintance with the ‘modern’” (CE II, 86). As with Benjamin’s rejection of the Jugendstil, the innate mysticism of the New York avant-garde of the twenties prevented artists from being radical or systematic. In fact, they lacked a theory for their practice. Unlike Eliot or Pound, avant-gardists did not create a critical discourse to make sense of their efforts. They were blind as to their involvement in a “tradition of the new.” This is why they rapidly abandoned abstraction and devoted themselves to a pseudo-modernism, and it soon degenerated in high-end Kitsch. Typically, popular success crowned the post-abstract or post-experimental efforts of artists and writers; Greenberg mentions O’Keefe in painting, but one can think of the later Gertrude Stein or of E. E. Cummings in poetry.

Nevertheless, in 1964, Greenberg had to acknowledge that there had been a second “crisis of abstract art” (CE IV, 176). By then, the admission was less damaging. The battle had been won, New York had triumphed against Paris. Greenberg’s modernist criteria had lain down the law for the art market; his judgments were shared by the network of galleries, American modern art museums, and collectors. If they were at the peak of an evolution in aesthetics, how could it be that Pollock, Rothko, and their
friends were reinventing an abstract art that had been launched thirty years earlier? This paradox of a “modernizing” evolution has been well analyzed by Bourdieu in The Rules of Art. Bourdieu quotes Marcel Duchamp, who was opposed to the spirit of the 1950s, and rejected the modernist abstraction promoted by Greenberg. “The characteristic of the century that is ending is to be like a double-barrelled gun: Kandinsky and Kupka invented abstraction. Then abstraction died. One wouldn’t talk about it any more. It came back thirty-five years later with the American abstract expressionists. You could say that Cubism reappeared in an impoverished form with the postwar Paris school. Dada has similarly reappeared. Second shot, second wind. It is a phenomenon particular to this century.” Bourdieu comments on this by adding that “each artistic act which leaves its mark by introducing a new position in the field ‘displaces’ the entire series of previous artistic acts” (RA, 160), a view consistent with Eliot’s concept of “tradition” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Bourdieu defines this constant reshuffling of values as a “struggle” but the fundamental view is the same: “Contemporaneity as presence in the same present only exists in practice in the struggle that synchronizes discordant times or, rather, agents and institutions separated by time and in relation to time” (RA, 158). We return to Bourdieu’s views on modernism in these pages.

Greenberg’s theory agrees with this, especially in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” a text blending Marxism and high modernism à la Eliot. One of his most ambitious essays from the 1950s is a review of Eliot’s Notes Toward the Definition of Culture (CE III, 122–152). In an interview conducted in 1994, the year of his death, Greenberg confessed that even if he had to admit to an influence, he resented Eliot’s tone of smug superiority, while confessing that he was most in agreement with Adorno. In spite of his likes and dislikes, Greenberg had incarnated the synthesis of modernism and theory that the Zeitgeist requested when he transformed an elitist Eliotian Trotskyism with an American slant into a consistent definition of modernism in the arts. Greenberg provided his solution to Eliot’s postulation of an “ideal order” of culture destined to be changed each time a new masterpiece arrived. Do new artists coexist peacefully with the previous ones or do they murder each other? Greenberg would suggest that evolution comes from struggle, often to the death: one has to destroy other reputations if one’s criteria are to shape dominant taste. This begs the issue of power, money, and politics, a social game that Eliot had learned to play as well.

Why then did Greenberg’s theory avoid Kant’s concept of the Sublime? This would bring him too close to his enemy Marcel Duchamp and the then nascent conceptual art. When in 1952 Greenberg praised Barnett Newman whose titles often referenced the Sublime, he did not mention this term once (CE III, 103–104). The Kantian Sublime risks introducing too much negativity. For Greenberg, the act of looking at an abstract painting does not offer the experience of “nothing” but of something: the painting’s bi-dimensionality, its shape and color, its boundaries on a canvas. Kant’s theory of the sublime simultaneously blends fear and pleasure: the imagination experiences its own limits, understanding that it is overwhelmed and cannot comprehend the sight, whether natural or artistic. Greenberg’s modernist
aesthetic is not one of powerlessness or impotence, as the later Beckett’s aesthetic turned out to be. Unlike Adorno, Greenberg shies away from any experience of negativity. He wants to remain in control, reach a common “truth” underpinned by categories of taste and universalism, whereas Duchamp insisted on complex calculations and subjective freedom deriving from indifference to artistic values. Greenberg starts from a phenomenology of sensation; sensory impressions will be filtered, discussed, classified, and rationalized. Art is based upon “reflective judgments,” which start from singular objects and the subject’s feelings facing them. Only then do they go back to categories that give coherence, finality, and a raison d’être to the object. This Kantian principle could be generalized to the use of theory to discuss modernist texts: there should be an experience of the text; theory is not meant to replace it or denigrate it, let alone stand higher than the personal interaction with a given object.

Thus we can learn from Greenberg’s experiential model underpinned by theory. His theory faithfully enacts Kant’s “finality without end,” this Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck, a notion that defines the essence of art that imitates the functioning of nature. What it asserts, most fundamentally, is that if nature is not absurd, then neither is art as social production begging the existence of a common taste. Greenberg ends up defending modernism with formal judgments buttressed by a concept of history that demands the notion of progress. Both Adorno and Greenberg believed that there were “discoveries” in the arts: one could not continue to write harmonic music pieces after Schönberg without being reactionary, or paint realistically after Mondrian without regressing. Neither Adorno nor Greenberg wanted to imagine a cyclical return of genres, techniques, and schools, parodic “revolutions” in a saturated field homogenized by the “end of history” deduced by Kojève from Hegel. Abstraction defines an aesthetic of taste and will not consider the end of a social consensus about the idea of art or about history. Those who destroy the consensus, like Duchamp, stick to nominalist aesthetics; their central claim becomes: “I call this art because this is what I do.” Greenberg has reintroduced the issue of value; he prefers saying: “Here is what I like, and we can all agree that it is good art.” He was indeed the last American critic who could reign over the world of museums and gallery owners, collectors and rich buyers; only he could reconcile the influence of money with the taste of sophisticated connoisseurs. Kantian theory as invoked by Greenberg to promote modernism led the New York school to the pinnacles of the art market. Was it only a tool in a struggle for prestige and power? Did that formalist theory of modernism mask and justify a geographical reshuffling from Paris to New York, did it merely serve the interests of international capital?

The history of art theory succeeding Greenberg has shown that, as Hegel himself had to confess, there is no “end of history.” Which also means that there is no end of theory, even if theories moved on, if taste changed, if Abstract Expressionism is only one among many schools. Even the concepts that have been offered as an antidote to Kant’s formalism, such as Bataille’s notion of the “formless,” require definitions and other theoretical deployments of concepts. Thus, quite logically, this volume is organized around concepts such as race, gender, class, the body,
nation, politics, ideology, history, aesthetics, material objects, visual culture, etc. All these terms demonstrate an engagement with current critical trends. The collection first surveys the main terms underpinning a critical consensus about modernism before pointing to emergent domains for which new methodologies are needed. Issues of class and race will be debated in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and of Marxist approaches to modernism. The politics of modernism show that its practitioners were as often reactionaries tempted by fascism as left-wing writers committed to internationalist activities. The old couples of the Hard and the Soft, of the High and Low, have operated in dichotomies that have structured the field. It has also been marked by technical discoveries such as “interior monologue” or the “stream of consciousness” technique, which lead to considerations about what is specific to modernism as a style.

There is also the question of periodization, which will not be tackled directly, since what matters most for the critics gathered in this volume is less the question of when modernism began exactly or when it ended (but has it really ended?), than pragmatic considerations of how and why important authors like Joyce, Woolf, Beckett, or Kafka have forced us to expand and broaden the term of modernism. It seems today that modernism has absorbed most of the twentieth century, that it goes back deep into the nineteenth century and that it has moreover swallowed postmodernism. This notion, which emerged in the 1980s, has surprisingly lost all of its purchase, in a sudden disaffection that some have found disappointing. This may be due to the new capaciousness discovered in modernism, since it had always included myth, rituals, and the archaic, as well as several varieties of Orientalism, but now is seen to move on to translation studies, to textual studies focusing on the archives, manuscripts, and history of the book. More recently, it has solicited the approaches of film studies, of phenomenology, of ethical theory, of queer studies, of the sociology of culture, of disability studies, of political studies, and even of fashion theory. All these critical discourses are represented in these pages. Finally, the discussion had to return to the question of aesthetics with which I have begun. The juxtaposition of the parody of the sublime (in a feminine mode) and the aesthetics of a new formalism provides a last but not final reconfiguration of modernism in our ever-revolving kaleidoscope.

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I want to thank Jennifer Mondal who helped me edit the collection.

Notes

1 See Derrida’s interview by Derek Attridge in Acts of Literature, 1992, 60–62.
2 I have pointed to the deep ambivalence of Rimbaud’s famous statement “One has to be absolutely modern” in The Ghosts of Modernity, 194–195.
3 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 1999, 545. For the German original, see Walter Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1983, vol. 2, 677. All other references to The Arcades Project will be abbreviated as AP and page number.
By this, I want to pay homage to the groundbreaking anthology *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott. In 1990, it redefined the field in an important way by highlighting many forgotten female authors. This was followed by two anthologies that also shaped the modernist canon: *Modernism, An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou, 1998, blended theory and literature in a powerful synthesis, whereas *Modernism, An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, 2005, less theoretical, introduced New Critical essays. The latter, at 1181 pages, betrays a significant expansion of the modernist canon.

Virginia Woolf was not part of “international Modernism,” for she was above all “an English novelist of manners,” writes Hugh Kenner in “The Making of the Modernist Canon,” 1989, 37. Kenner excludes Wallace Stevens as well, but for different reasons (40). Needless to say, this view is not shared by many today.

The pages that follow revise and condense an analysis of the opposition between Greenberg and Duchamp that was part of a chapter in Rabaté, Jean-Michel, *Given: 1) Art, 2) Crime, Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture*, 2007, 172–189.


**References**


In an age of “Theory,” can we still think of literary modernism in terms of exclusionary dualisms? One invitation to do so is the fact that modernism was itself deeply rooted in dualistic and oppositional modes of thinking – the “figure of a defiant speech in excess of the norm is salient in modernism,” declares one critic (Al-Kassim 2010, 12). Yet even Ezra Pound (1968a), originator of many of the pithy antitheses that continue to be ritually invoked in accounts of modernist writing, broached his distinction between “hard” and “soft” forms of writing with uncharacteristic hesitation: “I apologize for using the semetaphorical [sic] terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in this essay, but after puzzling over the matter for some time I can see no other way of setting about it” (285). Then follows the elaboration of the terminology that would be so influential in subsequent readings of modernism (“the word ‘hard,’” notes Hugh Kenner (1988), “was coming into vogue” [131]):

By “hardness” [writes Pound] I mean a quality which is in poetry nearly always a virtue – I can think of no case where it is not. By softness I mean an opposite quality which is not always a fault. Anyone who dislikes these textural terms may lay the blame on Théophile Gautier, who certainly suggests them in _Emaux et Camées_; it is his hardness that I had first in mind. He exhorts us to cut in hard substance, the shell and the Parian. (Ezra Pound 1968a, 285)

As in the earlier manifesto statements for Imagism, Pound associates “hardness” with a constellation of “textural” features that favor “definiteness” of presentation over “abstraction,” and the external “shell” over the “muzziness” of unfettered introspection (Pound 1968a, 3–14). Although “softness” is “not always a fault” – Pound notes that it is “tolerable” in “the good Chaucerian” style – it tends to produce a “swash” of rhetoric that is at odds with the “clear hard” quality that he regards as a
Peter Nicholls
defining quality of the strong lyric tendency in French verse (Gautier versus “Hugo, De Musset & Co”) (286). This “hardness” will constitute the trademark style of the new modernism: the writing of “the next decade or so,” Pound insists, “will be harder and saner . . . . It will be as much like granite as it can be . . . .” (12).

It is worth noting the conjunction here of “clarity” and “hardness” since, paradoxically perhaps, it affirms “a hardness which is not of necessity ‘rugged’; as in ‘Past ruin’d Ilion Helen lives’” (286). The line Pound quotes from Walter Savage Landor is, indeed, far from “rugged” or granite-like, exemplifying in its sinuous weaving of /i/ and /l/ sounds a musicality grounded in clearly marked syllabic differentiation rather than in a “muzzy” melisma. This emphasis on differentiation underpins his related arguments for aesthetic autonomy: the “clean,” “hard,” inorganic values of Imagism and Vorticism are the only ones which seem adequately to represent an intelligence which avoids surplus and works by reduction, denying itself the immediate pleasures of the “caressable” and the mimetic (“The caressable,” says Pound, “is always a substitute” [1960, 97]). “Hardness,” by this account, is a stylistic and ethical feature of verse that represents a challenge to poetic convention: “Gautier is intent on being ‘hard’: is intent on conveying a certain verity of feeling, and he ends by being truly poetic. Heredia wants to be poetic and hard; the hardness appears to him as a virtue in the poetic” (285). Pound’s own distinction could be clearer here, but he seems to suggest that the particular “hardness” of Heredia’s work is governed by preexisting poetic models – Gautier, chiefly – rather than by a “verity of feeling” that properly precedes the discovery of the “truly poetic.” As a result, Heredia’s poems tend somewhat toward the “frigid,” their “hardness” ultimately a product of stylistic mannerism, while Gautier’s verse, in contrast, cleaves to the supple contour of an original emotion.

At this point in his career, Pound’s influential advocacy of “hardness” over “softness” is expressed in predominantly stylistic terms, and so it would be grasped by subsequent generations of poets who would see the emphasis on precision and economy as a *sine qua non* of any theory of modernist writing. It was hardly surprising, though, that in composing his essay on French poetry Pound had found the use of these terms ineluctable (“I can see no other way of setting about it”) because their transparently gendered inflections already implied political preferences yet to be clearly announced. Indeed, for Pound, the favored “hardness” would soon come to be equated with the political as such, characterizing the emotional tonality and rigor appropriate to the “verities” to be expressed. In the political realm, this “hardness” would connote a directness and a lack of ambiguity easily distinguishable from allegedly decadent forms of “softness”; in Pound’s later writing, as in that of Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, and (perhaps less obviously) Eliot, it would often be colored by a kind of bravado through which certain rhetorical postures – Lewis as “the Enemy,” for example – were adopted in support of claims for artistic authority. When it came to poetic style, however, the clear separation of qualities was somewhat harder to sustain and this perhaps explains Pound’s caveat that “softness . . . is not always a fault.” In the case of The Cantos, passages of sustained lyricism were intended to achieve a sculptural “hardness” through visual
Hard and Soft Modernism

clarity and syllabic patterning ("Rhythm is a form cut into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE," Pound emphasized (1968b, 198) but, as Lewis remarked of a visionary episode in Canto XVII, the verse was to some extent still dependent on "swinburnian stage-properties", a sure sign of a lingering "softness" ("it is composed upon a series of histrionic pauses, intended to be thrilling and probably beautiful," Lewis cuttingly concluded [1993, 71]).

Lewis’s own art would always be more uncompromisingly "hard" than Pound’s, in part because his commitment to what he called a "philosophy of the Eye" (1987, 97) – "This is another condition of art; to have no inside, nothing you cannot see" (1990, 300) – was closely bound up with his conception of satire, a mode that requires a "petrification" of the human into the thing-like, an ensemble of grotesque surfaces rather than "classical proportion" ("art," he writes, "consists . . . in a mechanising of the natural" [1987, 129; his emphasis]). Lewis’s repudiation of the natural in favor of the "deadness" of the artwork accordingly values the "hippopotamus’ armored hide" above the "naked pulsing and moving of the soft inside of life." The satirical attitude, as he defines it, entails an absolute embrace of "hardness," asserting the artistic necessity of distance and objectivity. Yet it is exactly the seductive appeal of the "soft inside" of life that he detects everywhere in the arts of democratic modernity where "otherness, like opposition, is reactionary. We are all One Fellow" (1984, 73). Lewis sees the works of his modernist colleagues as variously capitulating to this failure of "opposition," as trading the "otherness" that should properly define the aesthetic for the "soft" consolations of primitivism, childish innocence, and the self-regarding rituals of democratic identification.

There are, we might note, some significant limits to Lewis’s critique of his fellow modernists, and what he condemns as invertebrate empathy is at times more critical and "external" than he acknowledges: even Gertrude Stein (1946 [1971]), arch-exemplar, for Lewis, of "the child-cult," believed that "Nobody can enter into anybody else’s mind; so why try? One can only enter into it in a superficial way" (993). Lewis’s critique of Pound’s work, however, strikes a more direct hit, mainly because he traces the lingering "softness" there to a persistently romantic attitude toward history:

By himself he would seem to have neither any convictions nor eyes in his head. There is nothing that he intuits well, certainly never originally. Yet when he can get into the skin of somebody else, of power and renown, a Propertius or an Arnaut Daniel, he becomes a lion or a lynx on the spot. This sort of parasitism is with him phenomenal. (1993, 68; his emphases)

Readers weighing this passage might assent to Lewis’s description of Pound’s habitual use of personae and textual ventriloquism but would probably also object that these are the very devices that underlay the poet’s innovative handling of translation and textual collage. Generally less noticed is Lewis’s criticism of his friend’s lack of intuition and originality and this goes deep, suggesting a fundamental division that Lewis sees as crucially damaging to Pound’s whole project. The comment in
fact tacitly transposes the “hard”/“soft” distinction to one between what we might call the theoretical and the aesthetic. In this respect, Lewis’s thinking has something in common with that of Mikhail Bakhtin whose unfinished text now translated as *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* was composed several years before *Time and Western Man* (1927). Bakhtin (1993) there describes what he calls “the theoretical world” as one which is “obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being” and in its place he proposes a “participative” thinking that is “unindifferent” and “engaged”: “Every thought of mine, along with its content, is an act or deed that I perform – my own individually answerable act or deed [postupok]” (9, 3). The truth of thought lies in the uniqueness and situatedness of the moment of its performance; hence “It is an unfortunate misunderstanding (a legacy of rationalism) to think that truth [Pravda] can only be the truth [istina] that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable or constant in it” (37). The aesthetic world might seem to offer an attractive alternative to theory’s pull toward abstraction, but it, too, proves ultimately inadequate:

... aesthetic being is closer to the actual unity of Being-as-life than the theoretical world is. That is why the temptation of aestheticism is so persuasive. One can live in aesthetic being, and there are those who do so, but they are other human beings and not I myself... But I shall not find myself in that life; I shall find only a double of myself, only someone pretending to be me. All I can do in it is play a role, i.e., assume, like a mask, the flesh of another – of someone deceased. (18; his emphases)

Like Lewis, Bakhtin regards aestheticism as evading the whole question of the thinker’s “answerability” which “remains in actual life, for the playing of a role as a whole is an answerable deed performed by the one playing, and not the one represented, i.e., the hero” (18; his emphases). This is the import of Lewis’s emphatic “By himself” which suggests that the abstraction of “theory” is registered in Pound’s work by the poet’s effective absence from his own thought (for it is never, according to Lewis, truly his own, originating instead in the dead “flesh” of someone else). Through his habitual ventriloquism, Pound “becomes a lion or a lynx on the spot,” and this “parasitically” acquired power substitutes for the authority that should properly accrue from “answerable” thinking.

In this confrontation of Lewis’s thought with Pound’s we see how unstable “hard” and “soft” can be as descriptive and evaluative terms. For Lewis, a “hard,” “non-human outlook” is necessary “to correct our soft conceit” while for Pound the human is, ideally, at one with nature and its rhythms – a “soft” metaphysics, in Lewis’s view, and one that means that the “hard” side of the equation comes to express itself in Pound’s work only through abstractions imported from sources external to it (1987, 99). In this sense, we might say that *The Cantos* would turn out to be (as Lewis’s comment partly predicts) determined by a constellation of “theories” on whose iterable truths – economic, political, philosophical – the poem would increasingly come to depend. Against the pressure of rhetorical and