

Editor's Introduction: Modernism, Aesthetics, Historiography

Daniel Moore

Aesthetics is the reflexive construction of the concepts necessary for the comprehension of the *stakes and meaning of art* in the light of the history of the dominant art of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century: modernism. The task of aesthetics is to vindicate modernist art's *own* claim to mattering, to being significant, indeed unavoidable, for our collective self-understanding of ourselves as denizens of modernity. (J. M. Bernstein)¹

If John Stuart Mill was right to suggest (or prophesy) that history was “the dominant idea” of the nineteenth century, then it is not an unreasonable claim to make that historiography is one of the more dominant ones of the twentieth.² In almost every discipline in the humanities, the importance of the way in which one slices into the past has pretty much dwarfed the potential results one might find in so doing. How does one in fact make sense of the past by analysing its contents in the present? Is the assumption that the methodology to do so exists inherently a flawed one (perhaps to the point of self-destruction)? These questions are, of course, epistemological. Historians have known, at least since Plutarch, that the past is a very slippery subject, and requires an awful lot of manipulation to really make any sense. How we go about ‘knowing’ the past is intimately bound up with the how, what and why of that manipulation. But only in the twentieth century were issues relating to the legitimacy of the discipline, the constructedness of its discourses fully explored for the first time. The idea of a transparent history founded on empirical, archival research became tarnished by postmodernism. Suddenly, history became (in the words of Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow) “as much a narrative-linguistic aesthetic as it [was] an empirical-analytical activity.”³ Jenkins and Munslow go on to suggest that postmodernity questions:

The epistemological principle of empiricism whereby content (the past) must always determine its narrative shape (form); the existence of a discoverable plotment (that the story exists in the action/intentions of historical agents), and that the ontological separation of knower (historian/being) and known (the past/history) leads to objectivity; [. . .] the notion of inference and the truthful statement (explanation to the best fit); the clear distinction between fact and fiction [and] the subject-object division.

The point of this rumination on the state of historical thinking today is that a good number of these issues were being raised in the early twentieth century, and many of them came not from within academe, but from without. And of those postmodern critiques of history and historical study, such as those from Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow, or from Rita Felski, Hayden White, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Carolyn Steedman, or Joan Scott (amongst many others), nearly all put forward an amorphous ‘modernity’ as chief culprit in history’s downfall or impending end.⁴ Why this should be the case is interesting for a number of reasons, and, in short, is largely what this issue of *Modernist Cultures* is about. What the following pages demonstrate is that literary and artistic modernism was very much interested in issues in historical representation that still plague the disciplines of literature and history today.

With all of this in mind, I wanted to begin this edition with a short rumination on what the quotation above from J. M. Bernstein has to offer us in our quest to somehow fuse together the concerns of those large, ungainly concepts that make up my title for this issue. Firstly, and most

obviously, it draws together neatly two of the strings of that tripartite title; Bernstein quite correctly notes that, in a tradition that follows Benjamin, Adorno and Kracauer, the disciplines of aesthetics and aesthetic theory are inseparably bound up with modernist art practices. Without the self-reflexivity of art during that particularly fertile period, and the considerations that art had for its own reception, Bernstein argues, aesthetics would probably be a fairly empty discipline today. Bernstein is quite correct to suggest that modernism's abiding interest is undoubtedly in formal experimentation. Indeed, the bulk of the work done so far on modernism is centred on its aesthetics, rather than its art-historical or literary-historical dimensions. This discrepancy could clearly be due to modernism's perceived privileging of the formal aspects of art over their historical 'place'; but to claim that modernist art and literature concerned itself with form to the expense of a nod towards its temporal relations is at best one fraught with difficulty. In a sense, this selection from Bernstein nearly extinguishes history from the modernist aesthetic matrix, except of course that it can't. Modernist aesthetics is, even here, infused with the desire to *matter*, to stand out and be counted, not only in its own time but for all time. The fact that modernism conceived of itself as aesthetically-directed, that it constantly made its own comparisons with other periods when art and its reception we're not in productive constellation with one another, means that it conceived of itself historically. Modernist art was, historiographically speaking, *self-aware*. And, if the essays that compose this selection here are the evidence, the proof is there for all to see.

The idea that modernism was interested in the past and its representation is, and has been, a consistently marginalized claim. Critics have tended to assume that if modernism does have an historiographical awareness, it is only because we have given it one, presenting it with an anxiety of influence and of succession in our genealogies. And, as the pages of this journal and other ones like it have shown, we still remain perplexed by modernism's historical *place*. When did it begin? Has it indeed finished? There are, then, two questions here: how did modernism see itself historiographically? And how have later generations incorporated its aesthetic and political energies into the larger narratives of literary, artistic and cultural studies? It is the contention of these pages that modernist art, literature, architecture, sculpture, dance, opera and film all have an *innate* historiographical dimension in the same way that they have an ontological aesthetic being, and that this dimension is largely unmapped and is worth exploring. Modernism also provides a potent locus for exploring historical and aesthetic epistemology, largely because it was a particularly *self-aware* epoch, epistemologically speaking. Growing sophistication in philosophical and scientific inquiry (be that the rise of a modern hermeneutics and phenomenology or the ramifications of evolutionary science and relativity) translated into art and literature in what are, by now, well-explored ways. But developments in historical theory, since the middle of the nineteenth century at least, afford us new ways of thinking about that epoch we call 'modernist'. The growing discontentment with the hierarchies of realism by the beginning of the twentieth century saw new responses to historical representation: anthropology, archaeology and social history all have their roots in the desire for finding new means of narrating what had once happened, and all contain within their working methodologies more inherently self-reflexive attitudes to what each achieves in its negotiation with the past.⁵ Without a doubt, almost every intellectual discipline was touched by the crisis within the epistemology of history that was pervasive around the turn of the twentieth century. And the literary and artistic experimentation taking place during that period was certainly not untouched by it.

Indeed, Hayden White has something to say about the particular demands that modernism makes on history. This is from *Figural Realism* (1999):

It is a commonplace of contemporary criticism that modernist literature and, by extension, modernist art in general dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot which still provided the staple both of the nineteenth century realist novel and of that historiography from which nineteenth century literature derived its model of realism. But the tendency of modernist literature to dissolve the event has especially important implications for understanding the ways in which contemporary Western Culture construes the relationship between literature and history [. . .] The dissolution of the event undermines a founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction.⁶

If this is indeed the case – if modernist art does provoke a more reflexive historiographical outlook – then it is as much by design as by accident. Modernism is rife with examples of thinkers putting us on our guard against the historical and historicist complacencies that the nineteenth century led us so quietly in to. From Benjamin’s description of a Western world being lulled to sleep by progressive accumulation of wealth in the nineteenth century, and his exhaustive attempt to shake us from the capitalist dream, to Marinetti’s demand in ‘The Founding Manifesto of Futurism’ (1909) that we “go set fire to the library shelves! Divert the courses of canals to flood the cellars of museums!”, to Wyndham Lewis’s assertion that “The nations allied against Germany are in reality opposing the interference of the past. Europe today dislikes history. It is not one of her subjects. The past is a murderous drug whose use should be forbidden. We have got clean out of history. We are not today living in history”, modernism is replete with jolts to the historical consciousness.⁷ The Great War, the politics, the speed of modern life, the opening of the full panorama of the human mind, all demanded new modes of representing the past, and new languages for capturing its essence. And, aside from the oft-repeated demand to live outside of history, other new negotiations were being made with the past. Louise Blakeney Williams finds that cyclical models played an important role in the early twentieth century:

In opposition to progressive notions, the Modernists found much more reality in cyclic views of the past [. . .] Ultimately, they used history, and in particular the idea of cycles, as a means not only to discover order in the face of disorder, but also to innovate in their own creative writing.⁸

The idea of a palimpsestic past, too, is prevalent everywhere in modernist thinking. T. S. Eliot declares as much in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’:

the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.⁹

I hardly need go on, as the pages of this issue explore these negotiations in new and innovative ways. The key point is this: modernism presents a plethora of historical approaches to the reader today, and we may be (as we pass through postmodernity’s challenges to the discipline of history and are armed with a new set of hermeneutic techniques) ready to fully undertake a re-evaluation of its historiographical complexity.

If modernism does, as Hayden White suggests, present a unique challenge to the historiographer (and *vice versa*), it is this challenge that the following articles take up. All offer new ways at looking at three key questions: How much did modernist writers, artists and thinkers consider issues of history and historiography in their work? How did modernism conceive itself historically (i.e., how did it place itself against or within an artistic and cultural past)? And what issues are at stake in our own historicist conception of modernism and its products? Several of the pieces deal with that first question as it relates both to canonical and marginal figures. Sanja Bahun’s contribution, “The Burden of the Past, the Dialectics of the Present: Notes on Virginia Woolf’s and Walter Benjamin’s Philosophies of History”, deals with some of the overlap in two modernist thinkers who are rarely placed alongside each other. Bahun suggests that some of Benjamin’s aphorisms, in the *Arcades Project* and in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” function very well in analysing some of Woolf’s fiction, *Between the Acts* in particular. By bringing these writers into constellation (to borrow from Benjamin), Bahun suggests that “Benjamin helps us evaluate Woolf’s epistemology and philosophy of history, as expounded in her essayistic prose and fiction in the late 1930s, and the understanding of Woolf’s art becomes invaluable for our assessment of the position of aesthetic production in Benjamin’s thought on history.” Keith Johnson, too, finds space to talk about something new on the topic of Benjamin and history, in his “On Some Motifs in Benjamin: Historiography as an Ethical Mode”; indeed, he

takes quite a self-conscious peek at Benjamin, asking early on in his essay, “is not one of the unwritten rules of today’s academia – not only from France to America, but the whole world round – the injunction to love Benjamin?” Johnson centres on the notion that an ill-explored dimension of Benjamin’s ideological apparatus is his ethical historiography: he argues that “the question of historiography for Benjamin and Kafka both is essentially an ethical one: how to express history (or even conceive of it) without capitulating to the dehumanizing forces of tradition and technology, each of which “see” history as either the mythical or rational unfolding of its own *telos* and not necessarily as the dynamism of properly human relations (relations with other humans, with animals and objects, with the Other itself).”

Other articles pick on disciplines that rarely attract the philosopher of history’s gaze. In “Obscure(d) Modernism: The Aesthetics of the Architect Pal Ligeti”, Rajesh Heynickx reclaims the historical treatises of the Hungarian architect Pal Ligeti in order to better demonstrate how the philosophy of history and the development of architecture might have some shared concerns. On the face of it, no other art-making practice so privileges pure form as does architecture; there is of course an important history of architectural style, but modernist designers, by and large, tossed it aside. It is interesting, therefore, to see just how the ‘rhythms’ of history (and, casting our eyes forward to the images that Heynickx includes, that is just what they are) influence the design strategies of Ligeti. What Heynickx finds is an artist possessed with thoughts both of the formal and social impact of design in the present and the relation they have with past and future. What Heynickx ultimately suggests is that the historical and historiographical dimensions of Ligeti’s thought offer us a way of probing more fully the interactions between aesthetics and history more generally. Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, in “Representing the Past in Photomontage: John Heartfield as a Visual Historian”, explores one of the more recent tensions to be exposed in the philosophy of history: that between word and image. The issue is not a new one, of course; art historians have always known that they grapple with the notion of historicity in a different way from historians of documents and the written word. The photograph and the painting demand a different historical apparatus, one that has only recently been theorised by writers such as Stephen Bann, Frank Ankersmit and Paul Crowther. Ruchel-Stockmans approaches these concepts by exploring the montage-work of John Heartfield. Mainly political in nature, Heartfield’s work critiques Nazism and its leading figures. Ruchel-Stockmans focuses particularly on the historicity of the photograph, which is, if not a modernist invention, fully-explored as an artistic medium in the early twentieth century. By drawing out the particular negotiations Heartfield makes with his materials, Ruchel-Stockmans finds another historical dimension in the practice of montage; by drawing on past images, archetypes and patterns, the *monteur* can create an historical *depth* in his art unavailable in other modes of representation.

Both John Funchion and Nick Hubble offer, in extraordinarily different ways, some thoughts on how questions of history and historiography influenced modernism’s relationship with the past. Funchion, in his “Putting the Past Out to Pasture: Nostalgia, Regional Aesthetics and the Mutualist Imagination of the 1890s”, demands a new tropology of historical representation to include an oft-neglected attitude to the past: nostalgia. Examining the short fiction of the regionalist and Populist writer Hamlin Garland in particular, Funchion’s essay insists that nostalgia created an historical imagination capable of serving Garland’s aesthetic and political aims. First establishing the features of conventional nostalgia, Garland then proceeds to transform the concept from an affect into a mode of emplotment that could be fused to a Populist political ideology. This form of mutualist nostalgia, rather than sating the consumptive desires of regional tourism, produces a shared collective memory of the past that could bond together a range of seemingly discrete groups such as rural farming associations and urban labour organizations. Through a consideration of the role nostalgia plays in Garland’s work, Funchion also addresses the question of why, so long after the cultural turn, nostalgia remains a denigrated concept by suggesting that its aesthetic engagement with history challenges the way we generally understand the relationship between the literary work and its historical or cultural context

Nick Hubble’s contribution examines Lukács’s *The Historical Novel*, Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* and Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* in order to map out the parallels between the trajectory of three literary genres – modernism, science fiction and the historical novel – and in particular their increasing incapacity over time to register their own content. He focuses

on a selection of science fiction texts, notably the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, which chart a shift from narrating the future to narrating the impossibility of narrating the future. This departure point serves Hubble well as a route into a meditation of the potentialities that science fiction offered (certainly in terms of Lukács's call for generic renewal), and a powerful model to suggest ways of reading the apparently defeatist plot structures of works written by Franz Kafka and George Orwell as "fool's errands", hinting that these works have a political charge and point towards future forms of consciousness, and new ways of narrating past and future.

Finally, Joshua Kates' essay works as a kind of coda for the issue. Kates' contribution charts the development of literary-critical discourse through focussing on Edmund Wilson's work. Unravelling some of the core concepts behind literary analysis, Kates isolates Wilson's pragmatic critical outlook in *To the Finland Station* in order to better understand its internal workings. At the heart of that text, Kates finds an abiding interest in the philosophy of history: "For Wilson, such an insertion of philosophy of history into 'real' history represents a clear gain in overall human freedom. Looking toward Lenin's achievement, in stentorian tones, Wilson declares: 'for the first time in the human exploit, the key of a philosophy of history was to fit a human lock'." Kates is also full of suggestions for a way through the muddy waters between the Scylla and Charybdis of aesthetics and history (and its attendant political and social adjuncts) in literary-critical discourse, and his contribution is an important one in helping to define the parameters for study in between these two disciplines.

Notes

¹ J. M. Bernstein, "Modernism as Aesthetics and Art History" in James Elkins ed. *Art History Versus Aesthetics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 241.

² John Stuart Mill, "Spirit of the Age" (1831), in *Collected Works*, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), vol. 22, 111.

³ Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow, "Introduction" in *The Nature of History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 12.

⁴ See Rita Felski, "Fin de siècle, Fin de sexe: Transsexuality, Postmodernism and the Death of History" in *New Literary History*, 27.2 (1996): 337-49; Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), especially 66-86; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Death of History? Historical Consciousness and the Culture of Late Capitalism" in *Public Culture* 4.2 (1992): 56-65; Carolyn Steedman, "About Ends: On How the End is Different From an Ending" in *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 142-54; Joan Scott, "After History?" in *Common Knowledge* 5.3 (Winter 1996), 9-26.

⁵ Indeed, a recent special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* was devoted to the topic of archaeology. See *Modernism/Modernity*: 11.1 (2004).

⁶ Hayden White, *Figural Realism*, 66.

⁷ Wyndham Lewis, "A Later Arm than Barbarity" in *Outlook* 5 Sept. 1914: 299.

⁸ Louise Blakeney Williams, *Modernism and the Ideology of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 4.