

## WHERE AND WHEN IS MODERNISM: EDITING ON A GLOBAL SCALE

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### Abstract

The paper explores some longstanding definitional problems in literary modernism with specific reference to studying modernism on a global scale: What counts as modernism once we start to look for signs of it across the globe? The author examines the question in the context of his recent editorial project, *Global Modernisms*, which draws together multiple international and disciplinary perspectives in order to create a discursive space in which a wide range of foreign language productions can be brought into productive dialogue. Raising the question of whether a distinction between “modern” and “modernist” can be sustained, he suggests the need for continuing efforts of recursive definition as the field expands in order to maintain a viable object of study.

### Keywords

alternative modernities, transnational modernism

### About the author

Mark Wollaeger is Professor of English at Vanderbilt University and has published widely on modernism and modern fiction. He is author of *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton 2006) and *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford 1990). He is editor of *Joyce and the Subject of History* (Michigan 1996) and *James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook* (Oxford 2003). With Kevin Dettmar, he is founding editor of *Modernist Literature & Culture*, a book series from Oxford University Press, and editor of the forthcoming collection *Global Modernisms*.

Depending on who you ask these days, modernism is pretty much everywhere you look, and possibly always has been. Where modernity has found cultural expression, such expression (the argument goes) is by definition modernist. In theory, then, depending on one's definition of modernity, modernism can be found wherever and whenever rapid change has found cultural articulation. Such ubiquity does not always sit well with colleagues in adjacent fields, some of whom feel that modernist studies, like Conrad's Kurtz, has opened its gaping maw, and is ready to swallow the world whole. Of course loose definitions open borders to two-way traffic, and many Anglo-American modernists, comfortable with a longstanding span of 1880 to 1945, may look suspiciously at scholars inclined to debunk modernism's claims to newness by locating the beginnings of modernism earlier and earlier. Not content with the annus mirabilis of 1857, which

brought Flaubert and Baudelaire onto the global stage, Anglo-American criticism has reclaimed both national territory and priority by citing John Locke and David Hume.<sup>1</sup> A provocative roundtable at the 2009 Modern Language Association Convention, “Unboxing Modernism,” pushed the temporal boundaries the other direction during the question and answer session by polishing off postmodernism like a leftover turkey sandwich. Further prompted by a question from the audience about the possible relevance of formal criteria, the panelists were ready to swallow realism whole before time ran out.

It may seem that I am positioning myself to pursue a critique of modernist studies’ imperialist aspirations, but (perhaps not surprisingly for a modernist fully engaged in the global turn) I am confident that scholarly resistance to any attempt to establish hegemony will forestall a new world order underwritten by T. S. Eliot, Clarice Lispector, and Lu Xun. Indeed, as a member of the MLA’s Delegate Assembly, I am quite certain that a resolution to rename the organization the *Modernist* Language Association would fail. At all events, the “Unboxing Modernism” session (sponsored by the Modernist Studies Association) showed no such aspirations. It engaged instead in an exploration of what it means to “do” modernism when the field is changing so rapidly, and it asked questions about what kind of frames—and more importantly, how many frames—are brought into play these days in discussions of modernism. The session asked whether modernist studies has climbed out of the boxes formerly used to define it and expressed the hope that it would never again be placed in boxes that are too confining.

I found the roundtable particularly engaging because it raised questions of definition that bear directly on my current editing project. I am in the late stages of editing a collection of some thirty essays on global modernism for Oxford, *Global Modernisms*, and have found myself struggling, as I edit the essays and plan the introduction, with a set of difficult questions. What counts as modernism once we start to look for signs of it across the globe? If no single frame or closed set of criteria can be adduced to determine what counts as “modernist” and what counts as “modern,” should we simply dispense with the distinction altogether, and instead think more broadly in terms of aesthetic expressions of modernity? Which is to say, why not dispense with “modernist” altogether in favor of “modern”? (Here, in English Departments anyway, one anticipates querulous objections from eighteenth century and early modern scholars.) In effect, this is the route taken by Robert Scholes in his *Paradoxy of Modernism*. Scholes’s explicit aim is to enlarge the category of modernism to include all sorts of texts that canonical distinctions tend to exclude. He shows, for instance, that texts considered low often share qualities with those considered high, and vice versa; but ultimately it becomes hard to say just what for Scholes warrants inclusion under the rubric of modernism. One criterion might be called ethnographic: to the extent that a text helps fill out our sense of the full range of modernist culture—that is, to the extent that it helps criticism

produce what Clifford Geertz calls thick description—it should be included in the modernist canon. But the adjective here begs the question: is modernist culture the same as modern culture, and if so, why hang on to the term “modernist” at all?

We might ask what motivates a desire to preserve the distinction. Is it an analytic desire to delimit the object of inquiry or a residual investment in the cultural capital associated with an implicitly honorific term? And if criticism means to hold on to “modernist,” can the grounds for doing so be specified with any rigor? Some scholars today seem reluctant to attach any formal criteria to the term, in part because questions of form seem to them to threaten to reinstate a limited canon of difficult, experimental works thought to be elitist. Call this the Pierre Bourdieu effect, whose bible is the first chapter of his *Distinction*. Of course not everyone takes this line—I don’t, for instance—and it seems to me, as it did to most of the panelists in the “Unboxing Modernism” session, that what’s wanted is not a box but something more like Wittgenstein’s family resemblance. The challenge then becomes, can we specify a set of criteria, subsets of which are enough to constitute a sense of decentered resemblance? If aesthetic criteria are entirely ruled out, the definitional challenge is displaced, without being simplified, onto the problem of modernity: are there alternative modernities, or, only, as Frederic Jameson has argued, a singular modernity? For me, editing my collection, the question has become, does a coherent set of criteria emerge when the putatively modernist includes examples from across the globe? Michael Levenson observed over twenty-five years ago that if “modernism” is a vague term, vague terms still signify and often remain indispensable (vii). But now, with geographical and temporal coordinates rapidly multiplying, is growing ambiguity starting to date Levenson’s claim?

At the moment of writing, I have not yet written the introduction to my volume (the editing having stretched out longer than anticipated—shocking, I know), but even after finishing, I expect to have better questions rather than definitive answers. I can, however, offer preliminary observations, and of course, more questions, designed to move the conversation forward. Let me first say a little more about the contents of the collection.

The essays include area studies of places that go beyond the usual suspects in English-language criticism of modernism: the Balkans, Scandinavia, Turkey, Algeria, China, Japan, and Spanish America. The collection also includes more familiar locales, such as the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, that have nevertheless remained, owing to the tenacity of disciplinary and departmental boundaries, largely blank spots on the map for most Anglo-European modernists. Other essays target transnational nodal points: Andre Gide and Vietnam; Anglophone and Hispanic modernisms; futurism in Paris, Italy, and Russia; Richard Wright’s photographs of Africa’s Gold Coast; and the early-twentieth-century project of translating Russian literature in England. There are also theoretical-historical essays on comparativity, cosmopolitanism, modernism and

postcoloniality, lyric poetry and globalization, and little magazines as a global form.

My collection is of course not the first to take on the global or transnational turn in modernist studies. *Geomodernisms* (2005), edited by Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, and *Geographies of Modernism* (2005), edited by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, both aim “to undiscipline” (Doyle and Winkiel 7) modernism by embracing cultural projects that do not fall under the usual modernist rubric of textual experimentalism, such as Taiwanese cinema or modernist architecture and by pushing beyond Anglo-American boundaries. My volume will build on the considerable strengths of these but will differ from them as well. *Geographies of Modernism* is composed primarily of shorter, conference-length papers; *Geomodernisms* responds to the problem of scope—the world is a big place, and modernism was of course never a purely literary phenomenon—by adopting a primary focus on race and modernity. My volume will continue the project of diversifying the map of modernism by expanding the scope of these volumes with respect to modernist locations, in particular by devoting attention to the most surprising “awareness gap” in Anglo-American modernist studies, Latin American modernism; it will also include a wider range of theoretical perspectives on the challenge of studying modernism on a global scale.<sup>2</sup> And of course new volumes are coming out all the time, some targeting understudied areas (e.g., *Pacific Rim Modernisms*), others diversifying established movements (e.g., *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*).

A major goal of my collection is to create within Anglophone scholarship a discursive space in which a wide range of foreign language productions can be brought into productive dialogue. Thus from the outset I sought as my ideal contributors scholars deeply versed in forms of modernism not well understood in Anglo-American scholarship but at the same time—and this is crucial—willing and able to open their fields of expertise to Anglo-American perspectives, whether by using a comparatist frame or by occasionally introducing points of potential contact or intersection. Which is to say that while an ideal but impossible volume would aim to speak as much to Brazilian and Vietnamese scholars as to Anglo-American and European scholars, the primary audience assumed for the book are Anglo-American scholars of modernism who hope to broaden their horizons by exploring comparative perspectives on the field. Thus the collection includes in the Locales section a contribution entitled “Modernity’s Labors in Latin America: The Cultural Work of Cuba’s Avant-Gardes” by Vicky Unruh from the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Kansas University. Unruh’s essay not only introduces readers to Cuban avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s (citing Henry James, Flaubert, and Ortega y Gasset along the way) but also offers close readings of literary texts by Agustín Acosta, Alejo Carpentier, and Dulce María Loynaz. Harsha Ram, from the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley, provides a comparative perspective on the futurist movements in Italy, France, and Russia while

also sketching a genealogy of the emergence of “literariness.” To give one more example, Nergis Ertürk introduces Turkish modernism while also suggesting, along the way, the value of pursuing a comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar’s relatively unknown novel (outside Turkey) *The Time Regulation Institute*.

Insofar as my editorial duties have drawn me so frequently into materials far beyond my usual range of competence, this project has often made me more than a little anxious. At the same time, it is exhilarating to learn so much from experts in other fields, and if my recent attempt to teach Woolf and Tanpınar side by side in a recent graduate class was not an unqualified success, the effort certainly challenged the critical presuppositions of the class in profoundly useful ways. The scope of the collection also raises worries about inclusiveness, but one quickly learns to stop worrying about what might get left out. The answer, of course, is lots of things, and it would be foolish to aspire to the totalizing ambition of Google Earth. The title of my volume—*Global Modernisms*—may imply totality, but the plural “modernisms” is meant to undermine the implication that such a volume aims to encompass the whole world. I have to add, however, that “handbook” is somewhat misleading insofar as it implies a slim overview or a kind of schematic distillation; this large volume will take two strong hands to support and a good deal of time to absorb.

And so the volume aims to redress some obvious gaps without trying to scribble over all the blank spots in Anglo-European critical awareness; it aims to set forth fresh efforts to think new parts in relation to an ever shifting sense of the whole. If a conversation with two of my senior English Department colleagues is any indication, the book should provide an experience as radically decentering for its readers as it has for me. Hearing my account of the volume over lunch, they asked in some puzzlement, “But how can you have a book about modernism without any Pound or Eliot?” (I should add that both colleagues, far from being stereotypical white males with one foot in retirement, are women, one a woman of color, and neither as old as they seemed at this moment.) Of course, such stalwarts are not entirely shut out. Eliot appears in a footnote in an essay on Balkan modernism, for instance, and he figures in his role as an influential editor in essays on the translation of Russian literature into English and on the circulation of interwar Anglophone and Hispanic modernisms. Pound too crops up in many places, as do such monumental figures in the Anglo-European canon as Kafka, Conrad, Mann, Joyce, Faulkner, and Woolf. But rather than devote an entire chapter to any of them, each is typically seen on the horizon, from a perspective that knows them but does not privilege them.

In keeping with this decentered approach, I have tried as much as possible to implement a model of dialogue and exchange in the way I conceptualize relations among different strands of modernism around the globe, and in the process of composition. Thus rather than chart the

radiating influence of key modernist sites, the collection aims to map a multiplicity of sites, from the usual European cities to the role of urban cafes in Yiddish and Hebrew modernisms, and to focus on nodal points, such as the confluence of German expressionism and magical realism in Nigerian “inflationary modernism” (in an article by Sarah Lincoln) or film noir and vernacular modernism in South African film (in an article by Rosalind Morris). To put it in another way, just as Eliot and company become provisionally peripheral, so lesser known figures become provisionally central, to the point where the center-periphery model is itself permanently relativized. With respect to composition, I encouraged collaboration among contributors by posting all drafts to a password-protected website, and I grouped contributors into reading groups designed to draw out implicit dialogues among essays. In an ideal world, all essays would have undergone radical revision in relation to one another, but given the time constraints we all face, I was pleased that a good number of contributors at least incorporated cross references to one another, and a few substantially altered some key points. Finally, I also enlisted Laura Doyle to write an afterword in which she aims to tease out additional common threads among the contributions. But a commitment to decentering can require decentering in its turn. So while dialogue and exchange provide the dominant model in the collection, I also came to realize that at times a diffusionist perspective is not only appropriate and illuminating but necessary. The diffusionist model understandably comes in for a lot of criticism insofar as it can seem to reproduce the center-periphery binary and all the ideological baggage that goes with it. Here of course the key text is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), whose argument against longstanding accounts of the diffusion of modernity from Europe to the rest of the world (which he classes under the capacious rubric of “historicism”) serves as a valuable touchstone for many essays in my collection. And yet some important cultural phenomena did spread out from a center. Consequently, while many contributions explicitly critique the center-periphery model, or emphasize instead processes of cultural exchange or the notion of coeval production, the collection also includes a set of contributions on film as vernacular modernism in which a new essay by Miriam Hansen is tested and expanded by additional essays on Indian (by Manishita Dass) and South African film.

Although the collection will not settle the problem of definition, it does throw into relief unresolved questions about modernity and about formal criteria for modernism. First, a few words about the question of alternative modernities (championed most influentially by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar) versus a singular modernity (see Jameson). Two contributions in the volume help clarify what is at stake in the debate. Neil Lazarus, writing on African modernism, offers a persuasive clarification of Jameson’s argument in *A Singular Modernity*:

Jameson understands modernity as representing something like the time-space



sensorium corresponding to capitalist *modernisation*. In this sense, it is, like the capitalist world system itself, a singular phenomenon. But far from implying that modernity therefore assumes the same form everywhere, as Jameson has sometimes mistakenly been taken to suggest, this formulation in fact implies that it is everywhere irreducibly specific. Modernity might be understood as the way in which capitalist social relations are “lived” —different in every given instance for the simple reason that no two social instances are the same. Jameson emphasises both the *singularity* of modernity as a social form and its “*simultaneity*.” (8)

Attempts to pluralize modernity, in this argument, fail to take into account the concept of uneven development: “singularity here does not obviate internal heterogeneity and . . . simultaneity does not preclude unevenness or marked difference” (Lazarus 9). Or, in Jameson’s words, “modernism must ... be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the ‘simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous’ ... the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance” (*Postmodernism* 307). The desire to postulate alternative modernities presupposes an “original” modernity formed in Europe that must be subjected to Eurocentric critique, but as Harry Harootunian has observed, the notion of a European origin inevitably entails the notion that modernity elsewhere is both “belated” and “derivative,” “a series of ‘copies’ and lesser inflections” (62-63; qtd. in Lazarus 9). Rather than accept the logic of original and copy, Jameson’s account of a singular modernity, as elaborated by Lazarus and Harootunian, aims to acknowledge difference and heterogeneity without instituting the hierarchical relations that follow from the positing of an origin. As Lazarus, citing Harootunian, writes: “the specific modes of appearance of modernity in different times and places—St. Petersburg in the 1870s, say, Dublin in 1904, Cairo in the 1950s, a village on a bend in the Nile in the Sudan in the 1960s—ought to be thought about not as ‘alternative’ but as coeval ... modernities or, better yet, peripheral modernities ... in which all societies shared a common reference provided by global capital and its requirements” (Harootunian 62-63; qtd. in Lazarus 9).

It is hard not to pounce here on the movement from “coeval” to “peripheral,” which seems to reinstate the hierarchy dismantled by “coeval.” But before we slap the dismissive term “diffusionist” on this line of argument, it is important to recognize that the deepest implication here is *all* modernities are peripheral in relation to a singular process of modernization developing unevenly across the globe. Following a similar line of thought, Sarah Lincoln also aligns herself with Jameson, arguing that “what constitutes modernity [for Jameson] is above all the impulse to make sense of—to document and to order or aestheticize—the disruptions, dislocations,

and disjunctures brought about by modernization itself. Neither material transformation nor innovative aesthetics, 'modernity' signifies instead the attempt to reconcile the two, to bring together 'modernization' and 'modernism' under a common conceptual and affective umbrella" (2). No doubt some may object to any model that implies a form of economic determinism. But in fact if such elaborations of Jamesonian thinking insist on global capitalism as a common frame of reference, they also leave room for the reciprocal influence of culture and economics.

Instead of trying to resolve a deadlock between competing versions of history, let me in closing turn instead to the issue of what counts as modernism. Lincoln cites "the disruptions, dislocations, and disjunctures brought about by modernization itself"; older, formalist accounts of modernism often used similar terms to describe its aesthetic qualities. Does shifting the concept of disruption from the domain of the aesthetic to the material constitute a correction, an over-correction, or a displacement? Perhaps all three, to some degree. Certainly many early accounts of modernism erred in trying to define modernism solely through aesthetic qualities, but it may also be that in some criticism the pendulum has swung too far the other direction. To return to the "Unboxing Modernism" MLA session in 2009: during Q and A, one audience member (OK, it was me) asked whether modernist studies could do without some longstanding points of reference, such as modernism as a crisis of representation, or modernism as anti-realist or anti-modernization? And is there any point in identifying particular aesthetic forms or techniques as intrinsically modernist, such as collage, montage, interior monologue, or the day novel? The question was meant as a provocation to what seemed an unstated ideal of "unboxedness," a conception of modernism liberated from definitional corners and dead-ends that seemed to me in danger of dissolving any coherent object of study. There was no time to debate substantial attempts to address the problem, of course, so after some veering between bravado refusals of limits and more cautious intimations that, in the words of E. M. Forster, "We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing" (38), the session concluded inconclusively.

*Global Modernisms* will not settle such disputes, but I hope it will help clarify the stakes of the questions that inevitably arise when modernism "goes global." For Lazarus, modernism clearly does not entail a particular set of formal qualities; rather, any cultural production that attempts to grapple with the realities of modernization or, more likely, the problematic of modernity, qualifies as modernist. Thus a novel written in a realist mode could conceivably count. Vicky Unruh, in contrast, retains an emphasis on experimentalism in Cuban literature, and Harsha Ram shows how what has often been understood as key formal feature of literary modernism—literariness—emerges from a specific set of historical pressures.

I myself remain skeptical about equating modernism too broadly with the aesthetic expression of modernity. The *struggle* with modernity, what one might call modernism's conative



dimension, seems to me crucial: whether the aesthetic expression of an engagement with modernity spills over into a sense of crisis or not, the felt pressure of desire, striving, and volition in response to disruptive change is fundamental to modernism. And with respect to *how* the grappling with modernity finds expression, some techniques and formal qualities are more likely to come into play than others. No exhaustive checklist of the modernist sine qua non is possible or even desirable, but I suspect that in the long run it will prove useful to bear in mind Roman Jakobson's distinctions among the six functions of language, and to explore the variety of ways in which a "set" toward "message" and "code," that is, towards "poetic" and "meta" functions, become variably dominant within specific geographic and historical coordinates (18-29). At all events, continuing efforts of recursive definition must accompany the current expansion of the term if the field of modernist studies is to remain coherent. Bringing together a wide range of perspectives, my collection aims to promote comparative discussions of modernism that will deepen our understanding by self-consciously unraveling the edges of the field.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See for instance *Modernism: 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, which, despite the subtitle, devotes much attention to *Madame Bovary* and *Les fleurs du mal*. For a Victorian perspective on modernism that reaches back to John Locke (*inter alia*), see Rachel Teukolsky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics*. For a non-genealogical take on Hume's relevance to modernism, see Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*.
- <sup>2</sup> See also the 2008 recipient of the Modernist Studies Association Book Prize, the two-volume collection *Modernism*, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, which includes a section on locales that is designed to decenter the usual Anglo-American perspective on modernism.

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