DISCIPLINING THE TIMES AND SPACES OF MODERNISM

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Abstract
This introduction provides an overview of selections from *Disciplining Modernism* (Palgrave 2009), an anthology of critical works that consider disciplinarity in conceptualizing the times and places of modernism. The selections provide extended examples of how a scholar writes about a particular modern artifact or phenomenon, not so much to illustrate how modernism and modernity can mean different things in different disciplines, but to provide various conceptual models for comparative studies of modernism and modernity.

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Author’s note
This paper was presented at the 2009 Modern Language Association Convention on a panel arranged by Janet Lyon, “Where and When Was Modernism?” In summarizing chapters from *Disciplining Modernism*, I have used the authors’ language, including my own in the Introduction, without always quoting explicitly.

Editing *Disciplining Modernism* (Palgrave 2009) brought home to me the need for considering *disciplinarity* as a third vector, so to speak, along with temporality and location, when conceptualizing the times and places of modernism. *Disciplining Modernism* grew out of a seminar at the 2005 convention of the Modernist Studies Association in which eighteen scholars from a range of disciplines discussed the various ways the terms *modern, modernism,* and *modernity* are understood and deployed in different disciplines. Philosophers, for example, typically date *modernity* from the 16th century, historians from the 19th. In architecture *modernism* designates a reform in design in response to industrialization and mass production which is, according to Charles Jencks, “the direct opposite of the more widespread Modernism in the other arts” (28). Social scientists use the term *modern* to refer to the professionalization of social services, while education specialists employ it to denote a pedagogy and curriculum adapted to individual needs and capacities. And as Glenn Willmott points out in his chapter in *Disciplining Modernism*, Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee in *The New Economic Criticism* (1999) note that
the “dearth of attention” to economics in modernist studies is due in part to the conflict between definitions of modernism in literature and in the social sciences (Willmott 197).

Clearly consistent definitions of modernism and modernity across disciplines are neither possible nor necessarily desirable. In fact, in the past fifteen years, scholars have begun to question the appropriateness of these key concepts for new interdisciplinary work, the kind that defines the new modernist studies. In their frequently cited essay by that title (PMLA 2008), Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz write that the recent expansion of modernist studies temporally, spatially, and vertically (crossing the high/popular divide), has exerted a “disruptive force” on the field and led to a “rethinking of relations among the terms modernism, modernization, and modernity” (738).

However, the diverse and often conflicting ways of conceiving the modern in different disciplines have not always been explicitly articulated, if even acknowledged, in the very scholarship that has produced the kinds of rethinking Mao and Walkowitz survey. An important exception to this elision is Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Definitional Excursions,” one of the two reprinted essays that bookend Disciplining Modernism. Noting that definitions “emerge out of the spatio/temporal context of their production [and] serve different needs and interests” (16), Friedman thoroughly and self-reflexively explores the range of definitions of modern, modernity, and modernism in what she terms the “multidisciplinary field of modernist studies” (11, my italics). Such multidisciplinarity makes confronting “the contradictory status of meanings” (16) all the more imperative, for “disciplinary boundaries have ceased to function,” Friedman says, “as people appropriate all forms of the root concept to serve their different purposes” (17).

And indeed, disciplinary boundaries ceased to function at that MSA seminar on “Disciplining Modernism.” Our effort to clarify disciplinary differences was thwarted by the fact that no clear disciplinary boundaries emerged. For example, a participant from the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration, whose research is primarily on urban political economies, presented on the jazz artist Sun Ra; a historian discussed literary modernism; and two literary scholars presented on sociology and economics. In other words, disciplinary confusion was already in play before we could even articulate the discipline-specific definitions of our key terms. And yet that very disciplinary slippage raised anxious concerns among the seminar participants about disciplinary rigor as well. Those who were already crossing disciplinary boundaries and who were open to expanding the range of what falls under “modernist studies” were nonetheless resistant to saying “anything goes.” They still wanted discipline, if not necessarily their own.
As a result of this disciplinary confusion, the objective of *Disciplining Modernism* changed. Each of the fourteen essays provides an extended example of how a scholar writes about a particular modern artifact or phenomenon, not so much to illustrate how *modernism* and *modernity* can mean different things in different disciplines (the initial goal), but to provide various conceptual models for comparative studies of *modernism* and *modernity*. I have time here to discuss very briefly only three examples.

In her chapter on “Religion and Modernity,” French historian Suzanne Kaufman notes that among historians of western Europe the claim that modernity is synonymous with secularism has long been an orthodoxy. Many historians of the west, she writes, have embraced an appealingly simple notion of modern progressive development that runs something like this: As societies modernize, with scientific rationality emerging hand-in-hand with capitalist economic development and liberal political democracy, they experience the progressive “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber’s phrase). In this scenario, the emergence of modern life is predicated on the inevitability of religious decline. Given this orthodoxy, which defines modernity in terms of modern mass culture and new consumer practices, historians treat popular faith as a holdover from the past. One consequence is that the interrelation of religion and commerce has remained virtually unexplored.

Kaufman offers a different approach to the study of popular religion, one that emphasizes its commercial character. Analyzing the historical development of the Lourdes sanctuary, a Catholic pilgrimage shrine in rural France, in the late 1800s, she sheds light not only on modern devotional practices but on *modernity* itself. Developments in new modes of travel, new advertising techniques, and in the mass production of goods—all adapted and even innovated by the clerical and lay promoters of the shrine—effectively transformed what had been a set of locally defined pilgrimage practices into an organized mass spectacle. The appeal of Lourdes lay precisely in its ability to fuse older pilgrimage practices with a new commercial culture, infusing religious life with powerful elements of the ephemeral, the contingent and the spectacular. It is in this sense that going to Lourdes on a pilgrimage was, for the devout, a distinctly *modern* experience.

By taking seriously the technological innovations of capitalist development as well as new social practices that emerge along with them, Kaufman’s understanding of modernity focuses on the interconnections between a commodity-driven mass culture and the lived experience of ordinary people. Religious sites and practices are not immune to these commercial developments, Kaufman argues. Indeed, they may even help to create them. Thus, Kaufman departs from the historian’s treatment of modernity as a periodizing
concept and instead defines it as a set of representational practices reflecting a new and profound awareness of temporality.

Jessica Berman’s chapter, “Imaging World Literatures,” draws on the new comparative literature to offer a model of a comparative modernist studies conceived as a mode of reading rather than as a canon-building activity. Rejecting three prominent assumptions in both fields—the division between world and located literatures, the forced separation of comparative literature from national or area studies, and the assumption that modernism represents the triumph of internationalism—Berman calls on us to discard any set definitions of modernism so that we might generate a new global modernism attentive to the local. If we are genuinely interested in shifting the center of gravity within modernist studies to other locations, and other time frames, she says, then we will need to alternate between close and distant reading, that is, reading in relation to local communities as well as across a variety of locations to reveal share traits. She calls for a specifically cosmopolitan model, where interlocking circles of affiliation would allow specific local modes to co-exist with a dynamic and varied global interconnection. Her model of cosmopolitanism derives from modernist writers themselves who, Berman says, rarely set up a choice between the local and the worldly but instead emphasize community-belonging as a primary condition of modern social life.

Finally, Garry Leonard, professor of cinema studies, in his chapter, “The Famished Roar of Automobiles,” offers the internal combustion engine as a model of modernity. The dynamic of volatile forces, systematically exploded at regular intervals, in order to be contained, redirected, and used as a force to create controlled movement is, Leonard notes, the dynamic of the internal combustion engine. Leonard traces this dynamic in the production and distribution systems of modernity across various fields—including modernist poetry, modern economics, self-help books, Hollywood cinema, and, most obviously, perhaps, psychoanalysis.

Freud took as his model of the psyche the modern phenomenon of hydraulics, the mechanics of using compressed water and steam to produce pressure. The key to a successful pressure system designed to generate a controllable force is the continual maintenance of contrary energies in such a way that at no point are they able to resolve themselves. A model of a combustion engine and a model of modern subjectivity, Leonard says, become oddly similar and mutually constitutive in that both generate energy from irreconcilable dynamics (explosion and containment) that are nonetheless envisioned as productively and efficiently “moving forward.” In Lacan’s model of desire, the constant “failure” caused by a chronic “lack” does not threaten modern subjectivity, Leonard says, it is modern subjectivity.
Lacan’s theory of desire, with its constant deferral of gratification, also characterizes economic modernity. Leonard notes that the modern money economy is not so much the discovery of greater energy resources and how to utilize them, as it is the reallocation of the profits thereby generated in an unprecedentedly unequal manner. In order to rationalize the stark contrasts in the distribution of wealth and resources that modernity allows, modernity generates a number of interrelated ideologies, most prominent, the myths of progress, of efficiency, and of perfectibility. These are ideologies of deferral and as such, they, too, mimic the perfect hydraulic system by creating a productive state of perpetual irreconcilability.

Hollywood genres, in Leonard’s formulation, can also be conceived as “engine designs” insofar as cinema is a succession of moments that nonetheless is a continual moment, producing forward motion. Perhaps one reason Hollywood cinema is never viewed as “modernist,” Leonard says, is that classical film appears to foreground its ability to tell stories, to smooth out discontinuities and ruptures through seamless editing. Yet it is the sheer fact of the visual, the succession of optic moments, that fascinates. If we want to understand Hollywood cinema as an example of modernism, Leonard says (invoking Miriam Hansen’s essay on vernacular modernism, which closes this collection), we have to ask how Hollywood offers up the sensation of modernity. What this formulation suggests, Leonard concludes, is that while we will never agree on what modernity is, we might be able to agree on how modernity feels. And what it feels like, Leonard says, is a bewildering but exciting onslaught of aggressively promoted compensations offered to combat unacknowledged deprivations. Understanding this dynamic of deprivation and compensation permits another way to think about modernism.

What emerges from these and other essays in the collection is an understanding of modernism as an epistemological construct rather than a form of cultural production specific to a given time and place. “Since there is no definitional consensus within disciplines and across disciplines,” writes Susan Stanford Friedman in her Afterword to Disciplining Modernism, “each of us needs to bring to consciousness what assumptions shape our thought” (263). That is precisely what the essays in this collection do. “Such reflexivity,” Friedman continues, “doesn’t fix what is fluid and diverse so much as it establishes the parameters for specific work” (263). Establishing such parameters does not “discipline” modernist studies in the sense of delimiting the field, but rather makes evident the ways disciplinarity informs our various conceptions of modernism’s temporal and spatial locations.
# Disciplining Modernism

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