

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ, ANGELIKI SPIROPOULOU (EDS.), *Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics* (UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022)

Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics is one of those volumes that have such a comprehensive introduction that it seems as if whatever might be said about its contribution to the understanding of the new regimes of historicity engaged in Modernist Studies has already been intuited by the volume's editors, Jean-Michel Rabaté and Angeliki Spiropoulou. Part of the innovative approach of *historicizing modernism* launched by Bloomsbury Academic in recent years by the re-evaluation of primary sources and by the rereading of canonical texts from the angle of their emerging context at the end of the 19th century and (with few exceptions) during the first half of the 20th century, *Historical Modernisms* is a major player of the series and of Modernist studies for at least two reasons.

First of all, it sounds a discordant note compared to most of the collections, focused on two major directions: either monographs of the canonical authors James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, and of authors considered “late” modernists, such as Samuel Beckett and Charles Henri Ford, or volumes that trace the socio-cultural configurations of modernity, like, for instance, the educational policies of the 1930s, in *The Politics of 1930s British Literature*, the representations of modernity in periodicals, in *Great War Modernisms and 'The New Age' Magazine*, or the reach of a global audience by the great modernists through radio-television, in *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era*.

Along with *Historicizing Modernists. Approaches to 'Archivalism'*,¹ *Historical Modernisms* does not display its perspective on modernism and the avant-garde and does not justify its theoretical tools solely for expository purposes. Both volumes propose working methods general enough (without being vague) to be used as models for overcoming the deadlock of a modernism often read in terms of aesthetic autonomy and ahistorical theorizing. Matthew Feldman, one of the editors of the series, makes a very clear distinction between *New Historicism*, espoused by the volume we are reviewing, and *Archival Criticism*, based on the relationship these two hold with the establishment² by means of the canon. If archival research is dependent on the canon, but also on the institutional support required in its critical processing (from the physical spaces that house various manuscripts to the funds allocated for their maintenance and research), *New Historicism's* bringing together of “general meta-history” and various “micro-narratives”³ is not made from the positions of a friendly relationship with the canon, despite it not entailing rejections of the archive. *New Historicism*

¹ Matthew Feldman, Anna Svendsen, Erik Tønning (eds.), *Historicizing Modernists. Approaches to 'Archivalism'*, book series “Historicizing Modernism” (UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

² Feldman, “Introduction”, *Historicizing Modernists*, 3.

³ Rabaté, Spiropoulou, “Historical Modernisms: Introduction”, 9.

questions power relations manifested through institutions and ideological lines drawn at historical, social and cultural levels. It is primarily interested in how they are recorded and historically configured in both fictional and non-fictional texts (magazines, advertisements, radio recordings, visual arts, etc.), regardless of their degree of canonicity.

Secondly, unlike *Historicizing Modernists. Approaches to Archivalism*, but also the Bloomsbury series overall, with few exceptions, such as the volume *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India*, the volume organized and edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté and Angeliki Spiropoulou could easily be the leading volume of the series by virtue of its coagulation of “other” modernisms, included today in the discussion on the binomial altermodernity/altermodernism. *Historical Modernisms* creates a network of both lesser-known writers and artists, including The Golls, Eugène Jolas, Kurt Schwitters, Koča Popović, Pompeu Gener, and canonical figures who shaped the 20th century literary modernism, such as E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Stefan Zweig, Max Ernst, Monet, Manet, etc.. The chapters of the volume mention and sometimes engage in the analysis of some modernisms originating from historical spaces not necessarily less explored at the local level, but rather considered minor and peripheral in relation to the central Anglo-American modernism. We mention here Sanjea Bahun's essay, *History and active thought: The Belgrade surrealist circle's transforming praxis*, which is a detailed synthesis of the relationship between the historical context (monarchical Yugoslavia) and the politically committed writings of the Belgrade surrealist circle. Another notable contribution, especially as a questioning of the division between Modernism and “other” modernisms, is the one made by Andrew Thacker, in *Spatial histories of magazines and modernisms*. Enrolled in an extremely recent direction of research, contained under the umbrella of *Modern Periodical Studies*, Thacker investigates how modernity/modernism is configured both in the journals that have so far contributed to the cultural-literary cartographies of the early 20th century (such as *The Little Review*, *The Criterion* or *The Dial*), but also considers magazines such as *Dyn* and *Palms*, from Latin America, or magazines with single issues and neglected contributions like *Légitime défense*. The *Légitime défense's* editorial team, made up of eight Parisian students originally from Martinique, combines Marxist criticism and anti-colonial discourse in a dynamic inscribed within the lines of force of Parisian surrealism of the 30s, aiming to outline, in a dynamic that today we would categorize as transnational, “a Caribbean literary and political consciousness.”⁴

By reflecting on the historical regimes of modernisms and avant-gardes, the collection enters into dialogue with the theoretical trends manifested in Modernist studies today. We are considering here mainly the transhistorical and transnational readings that propose the extension of the original modernist chronotope. In line with Marxist-Oriented Cultural Materialism, transnational rhetoric proposes a short-circuiting of the canon by reducing the differences between the Western imperial center and the colonial periphery, and the transhistorical discourse seeks to rectify cultural eurochronology, striving to find the aesthetic origins of modernism far back in time, beyond the 19th century.

⁴ Andrew Thacker, “Spatial Histories of Magazines and Modernisms”, 63.

Not only on a declarative level, if we consider the *Introduction*, but especially through the contributions contained in this volume, *Historical Modernisms* rejects the transhistorical approach, framing modernism within the standard limits of the early 20th century and, remotely, the late 19th century, however it shares the transnational vision, incorporating alongside mainstream areas, such as Anglophone and French, lesser-known modernist traditions. On the conceptual level, the authors' consistency is worth emphasizing. Despite the market competition of various derivatives of modernism – *metamodernism*, *hypermodernism*, *altermodernism*, *late modernism* et al.. – “the program of this collection” consists “in examining modernism historically, without trying to «overcome» or «surpass» it with a new term,”⁵ as Jean-Michel Rabaté and Angeliki Spiropoulou point out.

The present volume is dedicated to Hayden White, the most prominent representative of *New Historicism*, both because of his substantial contribution to restoring the ties between history and literature, broken by the scientific historicism of the 19th century, and to his essay, *History as exception*, which aimed to trace the reasons for why the post-structuralists did not engage in the deconstruction of historiography.⁶ We believe, however, that White's spirit remains alive in *Historical Modernisms* also by expanding and/or resuming some of the answers to the questions he formulates throughout his career, including in the interview taken in 2015 by Angeliki Spiropoulou, part of the volume in place of the absent essay. Thus, the effort made by the contributors to delegitimize the ahistorical reception of modernism, perpetuated after the Second World War, through the separation between mimicry and referentiality, that the historicist positivism of the 19th century had confounded,⁷ is to be understood in this key.

If the idea of a crisis of representation was long debated,⁸ not only applied to the modernist literature, but also in the more general framework of the history of ideas, the tendency towards interiority of modern thought, also known as “inward turn”,⁹ was almost unanimously accepted as a specific feature of modernism. One of the main causes of its reading in terms of a decommission from the real is, as it appears throughout the present volume, the “disaffection with the linear[ity]”¹⁰ of spatial, urban and phenomenological time (in the Bergsonian sense). This time, belonging to a subject with an acute “exilic sense”,¹¹ prone to self-reflection, disconnected from the continuum of history and from the causal relationship implied by the dominant status the collective historical time has over the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ The essay should have been included in the present volume if White had not passed away in 2018.

⁷ See Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, JHUP, 2000 [1998].

⁸ See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) [1946].

⁹ Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) [1973].

¹⁰ Eagleton, xxiii.

¹¹ Rabaté, Spiropoulou, 22.

individual one, is reconfigured throughout the volume. Rehabilitated as a “surrogate”¹² of history, this *new* time, of modernity and modernism, proposes to rethink the rapport between personal (inner) duration and historical (external) time, of “microscopic events that are in principle not observable,”¹³ in an analysis that unfolds and articulates dialectically the two temporalities – interior and historical. Although the time of modernism was generally associated by literary criticism to memory, in line with the development of the 19th century introspective and experimental psychology and, later on, psychoanalysis, the volume opts for a time which, although predominantly affective, filtered and sometimes sorted by individual memories, is no less a historical time. Time seen in this way seems to unify the two categories, memory and history, placed throughout the 20th century in qualitative opposition, understood today, from the direction of Memory Studies as “modes of remembering in culture.”¹⁴

Not by chance in the opening of the collection, Terry Eagleton's theoretical contribution functions as a manifesto for an interpretation of modernist temporality in a regime I would call trans-temporal: historical-psychological. The discourse marked by crises and immanent tragedies, formulated by Eagleton, juxtaposes modernism and realism, in order to show the lines of escape, but also the obvious filiations between literature and history, in an approach faithful to the statement that “to seek to erase history is itself a historical act.”¹⁵ If realism is marked by a long time of consolidation of the bourgeoisie, as stated by the theoretician, modernism is an inchoative time, of its crisis. Separated by the way in which time is engaged, at a conceptual level, in the evolution of the middle class of modern capitalism, being either a linear time (in realism) or the spatialized time of the capitalist city (in modernism), the author shows that, in fact, realism and modernism communicate, basically, through the very intrinsic dialectical nature of the figure of bourgeoisie.

Modernist writers, notes Laura Marcus, in *'The Last Witnesses': Autobiography and history in the 1930s*, were aware of the linearity of life narrative compressed into the form of the autobiographical genre as a conventional limit, which is why when they allowed themselves to be tempted by autobiographical discourse, although they did so deliberately, they also distanced themselves from the autobiography per se. Analyzing the autobiographies of eponymous writers of modernism, such as Virginia Woolf, Stefan Zweig, Bryher (Winifred Ellerman) and Walter Benjamin, the author manages to deconstruct a common cliché in the field of critical reception, namely the idea of rejecting the association of modernism with autobiography because of the supposed incompatibility between the temporalities of the two, that is, between the fragmented time of modernism and the eventful successive flow of autobiographical narrative.

¹² Eagleton, xxiii.

¹³ Spiropoulou, “History and Literature: An Interview with Hayden White”, 114.

¹⁴ Astrid Erll, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 7.

¹⁵ Eagleton, xxii.

Reread and actual today in Modernist Studies and mostly in Memory Studies, both as a result of the historical materialism he postulates and by the contribution made by his redefinition of capitalist modernity active at the beginning of the last century, Walter Benjamin is frequently mentioned in *Historical Modernisms*. His writings are, according to the editors, not only models for “critical readings of modernist history,”¹⁶ but they also inspire as modernist texts in their own right, as Laura Marcus demonstrates in her essay. In *Berlin Chronicle* (1932), for example, states the author, Benjamin manages to combine childhood memories with images belonging to the second half of the 19th century, just like Stefan Zweig, Virginia Woolf and Bryher (Annie Ellerman), providing an example, among others, of connected temporalities (individual/interior and collective/exterior). This Benjaminian recollection that problematizes the idea of historical discontinuity in the very act of its mnesic reactualization, notes Laura Marcus, is not necessarily dependent on the space of the narrative, but on the new places where memory is immersed. “The veil it has covertly woven out of our lives shows images of people less often than those of the sites [i.e. the cities – m. n., A.C.] of our encounters with others or ourselves.”¹⁷ In the Benjaminian modernist centrifugal temporal understanding (and not only), prevails the gesture of montage, as well as the synchronicity woven not by multiple and diverse individualities, but as an allegory, as Benjamin would say, of the tumult of the modern city, “in which different sensations besiege you at every moment on all sides.”¹⁸

Conceptual debates involving time expand its relevance beyond the idea of a time of modernist writing and writers. There is also a time of avant-gardes and visual arts, as shown by Sascha Bru in *Time assemblage: History in the European avant-gardes*, in Sanja Bahun's already mentioned text *History and active thought: The Belgrade surrealist circle's transforming praxis*, but also in the analysis that Rahma Khazam applies to Clement Greenberg's modernist theory, in *Clement Greenberg's modernism: Historicizable or ahistorical?*. Along these demonstrations, there is a rhizomatic temporality that is being set up, allowing the interaction with the theories of contemporary, and enriching the conceptual production needed today in the understanding of artistic modernisms and their afterlives.

Placing, in a post-critical attitude,¹⁹ the veiled “patience” of the avant-gardes at the centre of his heuristic approach, Sascha Bru shows how the European avant-gardes (including, among others, Russian futurism) do not operate with a different understanding of history and time compared to the modern one in a broad sense. Often considered anti-passéist, placed in a present always emptied by the eternal expectation of an eschaton of the “present” or, in the most extreme cases, of humanity itself, the avant-gardes did not postulate “an ontological

¹⁶ Rabaté, Spiropoulou, 16.

¹⁷ Marcus, 46, quote from “A Berlin Chronicle,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (eds.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 596.

¹⁸ Eagleton, xxiii.

¹⁹ See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) [1958].

primacy²⁰ of a single temporality. The concepts the author involves in redefining the time of avant-gardes and the contribution it brings in rethinking the theory of history in the first half of the 20th century are “polytemporality” and “interchronicity”²¹ (Bruno Latour, 1991). Katharina Ondulata, by Max Ernst, for example, is *polytemporal*, in that it brings together “materials and materialities with different historical origins,”²² and has an eminently *interchronic* nature, caught in a suspended and dynamic time at the same time, contained somewhere “in between past, present and future.”²³ Similarly, Sanja Bahun says that Marko Ristić, one of the Belgrade surrealists, proposes in *Without Measure* a variant of art that does not only involve a continuous writing and rewriting of the work of art, but also of history itself, “hence appreciated and cognizable only in the context of an expansive temporality that multilaterally connects the past, the present and the future.”²⁴

Also in line with Bruno Latour’s redefined modernity, but this time from a different perspective than that of *polytemporality* and *interchronicity*, Rahma Khazam frames Clement Greenberg’s so called ahistorical modernity in broader frameworks, intertwined either with “purification” and “translation”, the two opposite and simultaneous practices set by Latour at the basis of the establishment of modernity in an anthropological sense, or with newer and more fashionable categories today such as *the contemporary* or, its extreme extension, *the post-contemporary*. “Just as the purifying practice of modernity [notes Rahma Khazam – m. n., A.C.] exists alongside nature/culture hybrids in Latour’s scheme, so do Greenbergian modernism’s purifying and ahistoricizing practices likewise go hand in hand with its historicization and proximity to certain non-modern approaches of time.”²⁵ The theory of modernity elaborated by Greenberg in essays such as *Modernist Painting* (1961), *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) or *Towards a Newer Laocoon* (1940) is one which, akin to the modernity synthesized by Latour, considers, on one hand, the “purification” of the painting from any element foreign to the environment that accommodates it, in a movement of autonomy and ahistoricization, and, on the other, it “hybridizes”, incorporating references to a possible dialogue of painting with music and science of its age, which, according to Greenberg, “belongs to the same historical and cultural tendency”²⁶ as modern art. *Modern* due to the claim of art’s timelessness and ahistoricity, and *non-modern* because of the infiltration of various foreign materials into the body of pure art, Greenberg synthesizes an artistic modernism that Rahma Khazam defines from the positions of the a-chronological *contemporary* (as defined by Agamben and Smith), in the comprehensive terms of “an ethos of separation, division, and,

²⁰ Sascha Bru, “Time Assemblage: History in the European avant-gardes,” 154.

²¹ Rabaté, Spiropoulou, 25.

²² Sascha Bru, 147.

²³ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁴ Bahun, 227.

²⁵ Rahma Khazam, “Clement Greenberg’s Modernism: Historicizable or Ahistorical?,” 159.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161, quote from Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.) (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell, 2003), 777.

ultimately, sequentiality.”²⁷ From the vantage point of the *post-contemporary*, however, with which Greenberg's theory has more in common, according to the author, one can speak of a teleological modernism, in which the present of the modernity of modernism is shaped not from a conflictual past, but from a future of evolution and development.

Meant to establish a historical vision of modernism, the duty of *Historical Modernisms* to combat the ahistoricism consubstantial to modernism seems to have been successfully fulfilled. Firstly, because it shows that neither modernisms nor avant-gardes can exist as historical dimensions without questioning the autonomy and inward turn that have often been associated to them. Then, the success of the volume also comes from the (re)making and the implicit fixing (of) a (new) face of modernism and modernity. Correlated with a short, spatialized (Terry Eagleton), fragmented (Laura Marcus), centrifugal (Walter Benjamin), polytemporal (Sascha Bru), interchronic (Sascha Bru, Sanja Bahun) or teleological (Rahma Khazam) time, modernism and avant-gardes now appear as categories whose definitions are not only dependent on the idea of an inner, individual duration, but also, perhaps above all, on the societal and collective dimensions of a historical time. In addition, the volume is also an accomplishment from the point of view of an interdisciplinary agreement between history/historiography and literary studies in a broad sense. Narrativization, placed by Hayden White at the basis of his theory, in the contributions of this volume, when the authors resort to it, works as a link between history, understood in a Kantian sense, as a recovery not of the past, but of objects of the past, and literary or merely theoretical studies (see, for example, the essays of Alexandra Bickley or Andrew Thacker), whose fresh, demystifying demonstrations consider the particular exemplar of both literary production and reception.

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²⁷ Rabaté, Spiropoulou, 13.