

# Chronologies of Modernism: Factoids, Fictions, Accounts

---

ERIKA MIHÁLYCSA

**I**N A provocative novel written around the elusive figure of the writer who is often labelled the father of the modernist poetics of impersonality, Gustave Flaubert, we find the following admonition on the nature of chronologies: “You can define a net two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally you would say it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define the net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string.”<sup>1</sup> The point is driven home by three alternative chronologies of Flaubert’s life, each spelling out radically different, almost incommensurate narratives of the sense of the author’s defining life events. This cautionary, and exemplarily postmodern, advice should be remembered when one addresses the vexed issue of chronologizing a broad artistic, cultural phenomenon with so many prolongations into the (near-)present, as modernism.

What is the point origo of *post festam* times—of modernism’s posthumity? Can we really take Charles Jencks’ comforting tale, that post-2000 times are really the advent not of the umpteenth death of modernism, but of its resurrection as a more self-aware and self-critical *revenant*, or clone of itself, in a state of Derridean *hauntology*—something postmodernism has been taken for earlier, by such theorists as Lyotard? Jencks himself conveniently places Critical Modernism at the onset of the new millenium, following the postmodern *revorm* or *socitalist refolution*, of the global *cognitariat* and *muddle class*, and defines it as “not yet a conscious movement but an underground or tacit process, the activity of modernism in its constantly reflexive stage, a stage that looks back critically in order to go forward,”<sup>2</sup> a “Modernism-2” that refers

both to the continuous dialectic between modernisms as they criticise each other and to the way the compression of many modernisms forces a self-conscious criticality... Sceptical of its own dark sides, yet celebrating creativity, it finds expression in cities such as Berlin that have come of age under opposite versions of modernity.<sup>3</sup>

Jencks’ Critical Modernism seems to have had a much more modest academic career than his earlier conceptualization of the postmodern—partly for a lack of an intellectual paradigm that could challenge the status quo of global late capitalism (practically in

tow of the neoliberal policies of the 1980s-90s), with its asset, the culture industry, and partly for not grasping seriously a rift in aesthetics that goes through earlier framings both of modernism and of the postmodern, indicating a necessity to accommodate an aesthetics of negativity, radical scepticism and contestation, designed by Lyotard as the mark of the postmodern and later subsumed into a broader concept of (late) modernism,<sup>4</sup> and instead generalizing radical eclecticism as the distinctive trait of the postmodern.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, “Critical Modernism” has to take its place among a plethora of prefix-modernisms that started appearing at the turn of the millennium, some of which are no doubt here to stay: “metamodernism,” “altermodernism,” “renewalism,” “remodernism,” “digimodernism,”<sup>6</sup> all of which seem to be striving to reintroduce a spirit of contestation and opposition to the postmodernism that they follow, a closer link with ethics, and an ethos understood to be modernist in origin. “Remodernism,” launched against Saatchi’s commercial yBA and against the hegemony of conceptual art by Billy Childish and Charles Thomson, authors of the Stuckist Manifesto, revives certain aspects of Modernism with a promise of the “rebirth of spiritual art” and of “authenticity,” and starts with the bold statement that “Modernism has never fulfilled its potential. It is futile to be ‘post’ something which has not even ‘been’ properly something in the first place.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, Josh Toth’s Renewalism, working with a thanatological vocabulary derived from Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, proposes a renewalist aesthetic tendency and advocates new realism, an eclecticism of narrative forms and styles paired off with a deconstructive confrontation between postmodernism and an Enlightenment set of values.<sup>8</sup> Reacting to postmodernism that they perceive as spent, more of these prefix-modernisms seem to assert Rimbaud’s maxim that one must be absolutely modern.

The prefix-modernism most likely to stay is yet metamodernism, put in circulation in 2010 by cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, as a dual response to the disappearance of postmodernism and to the global realities of early-21<sup>st</sup> century. Situated in the middle ground between aesthetics and ethics, metamodernism is described as an “emerging structure of feeling” characterized by “the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment,” that acknowledges both (lingering) postmodernism’s radical skepticism and yet conveys a positive desire to move beyond that skepticism, deconstruction, parataxis, pastiche and irony, in order to locate the unreachable “real” that constitutes modernism’s principal preoccupation.<sup>9</sup> Situated “epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism,” metamodernism capitalizes authenticity (just like Josh Toth’s remodernism or neo-realism) and the agency and desire of the individual subject.<sup>10</sup> However, its very definition skirts the problematic and essentialist construction of modernism and postmodernism as each other’s binary opposites, and seeks to reconcile the two by co-opting romanticism as the locus of the quest for authenticity and meaning in the face of an essentially postmodern irony and skepticism—disregarding the fact that modernism emerged, among other things, as a reaction to the aesthetics and ethos of romanticism.

At the same time, these revenant modernisms might be, as Stephen Connor implicitly warns in his refusal of a valedictory statement, merely a changed face of the postmodern that has extended into the fields of ethics, politics and even into the unlikely field

of theology. Since postmodernism has never been adequately contoured, merely amalgamated from a plethora of “deflections or diagonal gazes” that fail even to satisfactorily distinguish postmodernity from postmodernism, by the 1990s postmodernism has increasingly “bec[ome] the name of the activity of writing about postmodernism”—a kind of “data-cloud, a fog of discourse” that gained autonomy in the academic and discursive field.<sup>11</sup> However, Connor warns, the ethical turn witnessed in the 1990s may easily herald a new phase of postmodernism, well alive and kicking, one oriented towards some positive value-claim of its own—a postmodernism that would be “not just constructionist, but itself constructive.”<sup>12</sup>

### A Modernism of many deaths and birthdays

**H**ERALDING THE advent of postmodern architecture in 1977, Charles Jencks famously gave the (more or less) exact hour of modernism’s demise: “on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 pm (or thereabouts),”<sup>13</sup> when the blocks of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, completed in 1956 in the orthodox spirit of Le Corbusier’s *module*, were eventually pronounced unfit for living and imploded by dynamite. (By an irony of fate that is not without a certain charm, the architect, Minoru Yamasaki, later designed the twin towers of World Trade Center, whose collapse was to mark another demise and turning point in world history.) Revisiting his former chronology in 2007, a date by which many of its former theorists were already sounding postmodernism’s death knell, Jencks unmask his former pinpointing (and marketing) of the symbolic end to the hegemony of International Style: “My factoid was believed because the world wished modern housing to die an ignominious death—I, of course, had no idea of the exact time in 1977.”<sup>14</sup> Replacing “factoid” with fiction in the best spirit of postmodernist-inflected language turn, Jencks proceeds by undercutting the retrospective account of criticism as mere theoretical fiction: “architectural historian John Summerson wrote that this putative death was the most creative idea of Post-Modernism, because it liberated everyone from the false notion that the modern was the eternal present and therefore always with us, not the historical construct that it is.”<sup>15</sup>

This “critical modernist” (re)turn amply shows that discrepancies between what was happening, and what was perceived as happening, are an inherent problem of taking the time of historical events. Chronologies of writing/painting/music/architecture *in statu nascendi* and as they were being disseminated and received, rarely overlap, to the extent that many “isms” have turned into “wasms” by the time they reached a larger coterie. The same is true of Jencks’ partition of 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic/literary/political paradigms, in which the concepts of modernity and modernism conspicuously overlap, and which fail to account for the prolonged existence of a modernist aesthetics not in tow of far right movements in the 1930s-40s, and not in line with a poetics of impersonality or of what Ezra Pound called “hard” (vs. “soft”) writing—as well as the problematic placement of conceptual art, alongside op art, inside a paradigm of formalism in “late modernism:”

1930-50—Reactionary Modernism: The movements led by Mussolini, Franco, Hitler, and Stalin that accepted the modern notion of the zeitgeist and a progressive technology and mass production.

1960s—Late Modernism: Tied to Late Capitalism. The proliferation of formalist movements, such as Op and Conceptual Art, and the exaggeration of abstract experiments in a Minimalist direction eschewing content. John Cage in music, Norman Foster in architecture, Frank Stella in painting, Clement Greenberg in art theory, Samuel Beckett in literature, and the *Pax Americana* in politics.<sup>16</sup>

One more shortcoming of these chronologies is that they are conspicuously tailored to (Anglo-American) literary modernism and therefore liable to significant asynchronicities and omissions: the 1940s-50s, when “core” modernism<sup>17</sup> in prose fiction was giving way to a new realism, saw the triumph of Abstract Expressionism in painting in the USA, orchestrated to no small extent by critic Clement Greenberg’s canonizing activity;<sup>18</sup> in addition, in architecture, International Style maintained its hegemonic position throughout the 1960s.

Most recent handbooks and reference works on modernism still operate with a very conservative temporal framework for (literary) modernism, that doesn’t take into consideration either the gaps and asynchronicities between the dominant paradigm in various art forms or the asynchronicities of modernism becoming a dominant paradigm in and outside Western Europe, and which essentially reiterate the temporal frameworks proposed by seminal works on modernism in the 1970s-1980s. One of these defining works, Fokkema and Ibsch’s *Modernist Conjectures* (1988), sets firm temporal boundaries to “core” Modernist literature: 1910-1940, within which “Modernism is a dominant literary current, at least with regard to prose and within the framework of the European avant-garde,”<sup>19</sup>—even if allowing for major Modernist works that fall outside of this period (for instance, Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus* [1947]). Peter Childs’s *Modernist Literature: A Guide for the Perplexed* operates with a timeline (compiled by Claire Smith) that extends from 1890 to 1930,<sup>20</sup> where the modernist movement starts off with such events as the publishing of William James’s *The Principles of Psychology*, or Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, and the threshold 1930, by the premiere of Buñuel and Dalí’s *L’Âge d’or*, or the publishing of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and of Bartók’s *Cantata Profana* (while excluding the same composer’s *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* [1936], Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936] or Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, for that matter). The 2009 Continuum *The Modernism Handbook*<sup>21</sup> proposes a slightly more generous timeframe (1890-1941) that chooses 1941—the year of Joyce’s death and of Woolf’s suicide, as well as the opening of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* or (although unacknowledged by the editors) of the publishing of Borges’ first volume, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*—as a symbolic end of modernism.

Obviously no chronology can be fully comprehensive. Even if the point origo is pushed back into 1890, there are still significant omissions. Jean-Michel Rabaté points out that Dada gestures were anticipated as early as 1887-88 in Eric Satie’s eccentric piano works with antic titles like “I. D’Holothuries,” “II. D’Edriophthalma,” complete with

annotations (“Like a nightingale with a toothache”), and which entered upon a second career in 1913 when rediscovered by Debussy.<sup>22</sup> Most accounts similarly leave out such works as André Gide’s *Paludes* (1895) with its programmatic relinquishing of Symbolism, or Paul Valéry’s *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*, that proposes a character type which was to become central to Modernism (“intellectual animal without attachments”).<sup>23</sup> At the other end, works like Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), which already foreshadow a rigorously anti-mimetic aesthetics and introduce most of the narrative strategies that were to become the staple elements of postmodern metafiction, sit awkwardly within “core” conceptions of (High) Modernism.

At the other end, there are quite a handful of contestants for an official death-date of modernism and/or of modernity—here are some of those proposed by Jencks: 1968 (May riots, French students attack Bigness); 1969 (Civil Rights and Vietnam protests); 1971 (Oil spill) - 1986 (Chernobyl) - 1992 (Exxon Valdez); 1980 (Solidarity in Poland rises against Totalitarianism); 1989 (Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe); 1993 4 October (Yeltsin storms Supreme Soviet).<sup>24</sup> To these one could add several tentative brick-holes in a symbolic burial of Modernism in literature and in the arts:

1961—first Prix International awarded to Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett—jointly acknowledging the two defining masters of postwar literature, chosen by John Barth as prime examples of “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1980)

1979—Jean-Francois Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*

1980—Achille Bonito Oliva puts the term *Transavanguardia* in circulation (“Aperto 80,” Venice Biennale 1980)

1983—Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a critical regionalism: six points for an architecture of resistance”

1989—Granta magazine’s special issue dedicated to American “dirty realism”

One of the obvious problems with most mainstream chronologies of (Anglo-American) literary Modernism is that they rely for validation and for their points of departure on the visual arts. The year 1910, acknowledged as a watershed in sensibilities, was put in circulation retrospectively by Ezra Pound, who speaks of “the generation of 1910” in a 1914 letter to Joyce, and by Virginia Woolf who famously wrote in her 1923 essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” that “about December, 1910, human character changed.”<sup>25</sup> To change “human character” was the purpose of the two “post-impressionist” exhibitions at Grafton Galleries organized by Roger Fry who coined the umbrella term for encompassing painters as diverse as Puvis de Chavannes, Gauguin, Cézanne, Odilon Redon, Toulouse-Lautrec or van Gogh (the sequel, in 1912, was to introduce Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and several Fauvists to the London audience)—in short, a near-comprehensive cross-section of turn-of-the-century French painters (most of them dead) who never claimed to belong to any “movement” in the wake of Impressionism, and whose aesthetics would extend from the Nabis, pointillists and Symbolists to early Cubism

and a French variety of Expressionism. As Jean-Michel Rabaté poignantly observes, “[Woolf’s] remark means above all that her view of the world changed in December 1910, and primarily under the influence of modern painting...[the painters] were all French, and the distance afforded by the Channel allowed such generalizations.”<sup>26</sup> Even more strikingly, the famous 1913 Armory Show exhibition, that was to introduce contemporary European painting and sculpture to the US, ushered together an unlikely mix comprising Delacroix, Ingres, Bourdelle, various Impressionists, through van Gogh and Hodler, to Brancusi, Matisse and Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The latter’s first publicly exhibited ready-made (*Bicycle Wheel*) was to establish his position in the US as one of the central figures of early 20th-century art, not lastly due to Clement Greenberg’s canon-formation. In contrast to the English-speaking world, most of the artists exhibited at the Grafton Galleries or at the Armory Show percolated continental literature and culture much earlier—suffice it to mention the example of van Gogh, the occasion for finding a language beyond words, a language of colours, in Hugo von Hoffmannsthal’s fictitious 1907 “The Letters of One Who Returned,” situated in a fictitious 1901 exhibition, written in continuation of the famous “Lord Chandos Letter” of 1902, one of the most radical statements of language scepticism in early 20th century European literature. What set the stage in Europe at the onset of the Modernist period were far more progressive currents and movements:

What we tend to call “high modernism” today is mostly born out of a reaction—often critical, at times sympathetic—to three avant-gardist artistic trends that had come to the fore between 1906 and 1910, unanimism, cubism, and futurism... Anglo-American modernism initially refused the collectivist drift of the French unanimists in the name of ‘individualism’—at a moment when individualism came under unprecedented threat by the new economic uniformization and industrial massification.<sup>27</sup>

Recognizing these inherent asynchronicities, Jean-Michel Rabaté proposes a “simultaneist” historical and chronological reading of Modernism that focuses on one year (1913)—a “punctuation point rather than red-letter day”<sup>28</sup>—seen as the inception of the modern period of globalization that could function “as a frame, a limit, and a global attractor of trends and currents” in newly globalized world literature and the arts.<sup>29</sup> The questions this investigation raises are: was modernism already a visible and dominant trend in 1913? How international or cosmopolitan was modernism in 1913?<sup>30</sup> As Rabaté’s exemplarily context-sensitive situationist readings point out, the artistic and literary events coagulating around the year 1913 bring out the *Zeitgeist*, as well as the inherent plurality, and European/global dissemination, of Modernism understood not merely as style but as a polysystem of works, the conditions and contexts of their production, and their reception. Not lastly, these readings explode long-embedded monolithic concepts of the various avant-gardes, as well as suggesting sensitive shifts of focus—as demonstrated by the simultaneous coexistence of “hard” Futurism with contestations of its phallogocratic conservatism (1913: Valentine de Saint-Point, *Futurist Manifesto of Lust*; 1914, Mina Loy’s *Feminist Manifesto*). One of the significant artistic events anatomized in

this book is the first collective production of ZAUM, an “Avenirist” group (“trans-reason, beyond-sense,” founded in 1912), of the opera *Victory over the Sun*, a collaborative work of Khruchenykh, Matiushin, Malevitch, Khlebnikov, performed in Luna Park, St. Petersburg, in December 1913. The opera included as emblem a precursor of Malevitch’s *Black Square on White Ground*; this “anti-Rite of Spring” was a radically collective artwork, founded on a futurist literary practice similar to Marinetti’s *parole in libertà*, which took language as a pure medium, working by puns and distortions to make it musical and subversive of “common sense.” The setting’s intimations of much later *arte povera*, combined with a proto-Dadaist buoyancy and playfulness, make this overlooked revolutionary artwork, a chronological birth of suprematism, one of the most radical avant-garde negations of art by art.<sup>31</sup>

A somewhat similar approach, of exploring in depth some of the crucial data of Modernism, is taken by Timothy J. Clark in *Farewell to an Idea* (1999) which addresses (aesthetic) Modernism as a history of revolt against modernity (capital) through an avant-garde disruption of normative representation, and asks the fundamental question, how present-day readers/viewers are to understand what is being lost as Modernism comes to its end, and what is at stake in coming to terms with our current condition, of the overwhelming triumph of modernity. Clark proposes a reading as recognition of loss that starts from the premise, “Modernism is our antiquity,”<sup>31</sup> with the forms of representation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century so remote to become unreadable. His project shows X-ray images, focusing on six “limit cases” of the ways in which representational strategies enact the “disenchantment with the world” of modernity, connected to the dates 1793, 1892, 1905, 1912, 1920, 1947-51 and the work of Jacques-Louis David, Lucien Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Kasimir Malevich/Lazar “El” Lissitzky, and Jackson Pollock. In Clark’s reading, Modernism’s significance is directly dependant on its potential to stage a protest against modernity ruled by contingency—meaning, a relinquishment of a shared social imaginary, translatable as focus and purpose—and thus, on its opposition to the hegemony of modern capitalism, to the totalitarian state, to the culture industries and their engendered forms of representation:

Modernism had two great wishes. It wanted its audience to be led toward a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim); but equally it dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, Modernism’s “social project” and representational explorations were both ending with the arrival of 1989 (the death of socialism<sup>34</sup> and a death-date of the idea of Modernism), because modernity—understood as culture driven by economic forces, and their colonization of every aspect of political and social life—had triumphed. It is in this sense that Clark dedicates a chapter to Picasso’s 1912 *Ma Jolie*, a centrepiece of Cubism that is understood as “the moment when modernism focused on its means and purposes with a special vengeance,” becoming “*the* idiom of visual art in the twentieth century” and “the theme of modernism” in so far as it is “the last best hope for those who

believe that modern art found its subject-matter in itself—in its own means and procedures. And that in doing so it found an idiom adequate to modern experience. And therefore founded a tradition.”<sup>35</sup> Picasso’s painting, hailed by Clement Greenberg, Herbert Read, Michael Fried as the ultimate test-case and triumph of Cubism, is read as the picture (and best pictorial representation) of artistic self-sufficiency and (the myth of) autonomy which, however, fails to function critically in relation to representation in order to perform this critique of modernity, eventually becoming a “metaphorical admission of counterfeit:”

The picture’s metaphorizing of its subject, as I see it—and I want to call that subject simply the process of representation... happens in its microstructure: the metaphor, the shifting, is in the relation of procedures to purposes, of describing to totalizing, of “abstract” to “illusionism.” The metaphor, if I can put it this way, is in the obscurity not of consciousness or inwardness, but of what is most outward and on the surface in “*Ma Jolie*”—what are most matters of fact or practice about it. Modernism’s metaphors are always directed essentially (tragically) to technique; because only technique seems to offer a ground, or a refuge, in a merely material world.<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly, the new language introduced by Cubism (akin to Modernism’s *expressive form* in literature) is in fact the performance of a new language, a scrupulous method of revealing “the best, most pungent resources of illusionism” to the gaze of the spectator as “resources,” as “ways of making a painting,” therefore merely “illusionism in disguise,” far from addressing some other object-world or some other way of world-making.<sup>37</sup> This “disenchanted” reading offers up thus a Modernism—and its contingent form of critical thinking, New Criticism—crystallized around a gap, a lack in the very driving force of the avant-gardes, the ambition of turning the sign away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism.

### The question of chronology: a question of aesthetics

**W**HAT ARE these chronologies to make of the oeuvre of writers like Joyce and Beckett—who have become central to both Modernism and postmodernism studies, precisely by virtue of their potential to engage theory inexhaustibly, by their critical/theoretical visibility and “visitability?” Are chronologies to go along the academic debates of the 1980s-’90s who cut Joyce/Beckett in two, into a “tamer,” more mimeticist, contained “Modernist” and a racier “postmodernist” half, the latter celebrating infinity, semiosis and the lateral proliferation of meaning? And what are they to make of those Modernists belonging to different generations who did not have the good grace to die before 1941, and who continued writing work that was Modernist in form and inspiration, in and out of Europe?

Samuel Beckett’s works and the data of his life have become grounds of contestation, points of departure and end-points for tentative chronologies of modernism/post-



modernism. Singled out as one of the exemplary authors of the so-called “Literature of Exhaustion” by John Barth,<sup>38</sup> he is labelled as a late — or, with Anthony Cronin, “last”<sup>39</sup> — modernist who exhausts the (organicist, mimetic) poetics of modernism while sticking to its politics of opposition and resistance. The meaning of “exhaustion” in Beckett’s texts is thoroughly changed in Gilles Deleuze’s 1992 introductory essay to Beckett’s television plays, placing Beckett’s three “languages of exhaustion” under the auspices of a radical opening up and self-erasure of writing, thereby extricating him from a Modernist aesthetics.<sup>40</sup> Whereas Ihab Hassan<sup>41</sup> and Rüdiger Imhof<sup>42</sup> proposed 1938, the year of the publishing of *Murphy*, as the beginning of literary postmodernism labelled “the literature of silence,” and as the beginning of postmodern metafiction respectively (the former coupling Beckett in an unlikely tandem with Henry Miller as “intimates of silence—obsessive babblers,” the latter hooking *Murphy* to Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*), December 1989 was appointed to mark the “death” (or at least, one of the “many deaths”) of postmodernism also because it was Beckett’s date of death. Beckett’s text-world continues to be visited to an equal extent by Modernism and postmodernism studies as exemplary and constitutive of both. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* for instance, the uncanny and the disintegrating self are presented as points of entry into his fiction, which is ultimately seen as expressive of the void.<sup>43</sup> Steven Connor adopts a more nuanced approach in his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, allowing for the Beckettian aesthetic to both saddle and elude framings of Modernism and postmodernism. As concerns the poetics of indeterminacy and the so-called language turn, whose exuberant, celebratory self-affirmation is equalled with postmodernism, Beckett’s writing falls into the category of Modernism: “where a writer like Beckett enacted the kind of shrivelling away of language under the pressure of doubt, postmodernist texts were excited by the prospect of the illegitimate, the unspeakable, and the unknowable.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, even if delineated as anorexic and ascetic as opposed to postmodern “bigness” and excess, the Beckettian oeuvre’s Modernism is at best half-hearted: whereas the texts’ relentless noncompliance with the ethos of achievement and the trope of mastery distance them from staple Modernism, on the other hand their austerity “seems like the last reassertion of a Modernist impulse to master the world in the word, though not by bulimic absorption of reality, but rather by anorexic abstention from it.”<sup>45</sup> And even this reluctant association with Modernist poetics has a postmodern flipside, as the endless recycling of materials and drive to repetition and reproduction, this “perpetuum immobile” of the Beckettian text-world, may be seen as “a curious, self-consuming kind of obesity,” a “principle of self-aggrandizement.”<sup>46</sup> Beckett’s self-reducing, singular writing seems to belong to that grey zone ghosted by parallel aesthetics and their lingering accounts, between “Modernism” and “postmodernism,” and functions as a litmus test to their validity.

Theorists of both modernism and postmodernism adopt a view of Modernism that excludes the more radical facets — in order to keep the ‘core canon’ of Modernism distinct, the avant-garde movements (especially Dada, Surrealism, but also the work of such not easily classifiable authors as Gertrude Stein) have been relegated to a category of their own,<sup>47</sup> or subsumed with their subversive, heterodox aesthetic into postmodernism — the rupture line being traced through the polarity list ontological certainty/uncertainty,

presence/absence, hierarchy/anarchy, determinacy/indeterminacy.<sup>48</sup> Thus a “postmodernist modernism” emerges that is, arguably, a forgotten side of Modernism; however, the reappropriation of such opposing terms into the interior of Modernism would be equally misleading, since some of the polarities used to chart the borderline between “mainstream” and “radical” modernists are also at work in the tensions within works of “mainstream” modernists. The oscillation and tension between conceptual form vs. aleatory flux, determinacy vs. indeterminacy is a constituent of the Modernist poetics of Anglophone literatures—apparent in the “postmodernization” of most of the major figures previously associated with High Modernism (from Joyce and T.S. Eliot to Wallace Stevens), as the protean form, textual flux and self-generating nature of their discourse cannot be reduced to tamer tropes which uphold unity in difference (for instance, paradox, metaphor, tamer forms of irony), codified by New Criticism. The criticism of the 1970s, informed by Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, channelled attention towards the proliferation of disparate modes and voices mostly, emphasizing the importance of divergent and, at times, transient personal interests, interpretive conventions, social contexts in the processes of textual comprehension. The author, accordingly, was transformed from unifying consciousness to a conduit of disparate discursive systems, occasionally conflicting ideological assumptions — the (supposedly organic, coherent) literary text becoming a site of dissonant, polyphonic voices, unassimilated fragments, irreconcilable lines of rupture waging war on each other.<sup>49</sup> In view of such critical developments, Marjorie Perloff<sup>50</sup> voices a claim for an irreducible variety of “Modernisms” that could accommodate the logic of disintegration. Similarly, Jean-Michel Rabaté reproposed an opening of the files, demonstrating through a series of sensitive microtextual readings of modernism’s textual/sexual/social politics that all attempts to declare it dead or finished, or replaced by different varieties of postmodernisms, are belied by its lingering ‘ghosts.’ He draws attention to the differential values and intensities displayed by interferences at work in (un)coupled modernist texts from Verlaine-Rimbaud to Stein-Toklas, and launches the claim for a differentiated historical context that can be both genealogical and taxonomic in mapping the diverging uses of the term ‘modernism:’

...much of what we call “modernism” consists precisely in the attempt to eat the cultural cake and *be* it (that is, embody its most radical potentialities), or to keep postulating an ideal museum—from Homer to the present, according to Eliot or Pound—a synthetic and mobile museum in which the modernist will appoint himself as sole curator. This double postulation no doubt raises the stakes for the artist, increases the responsibilities and the “great labor” awaiting whoever wishes to “make it all new,” despite a paralyzing awareness of secondarity. Any would-be “author” will return to the medieval dilemma: under what conditions can he or she “add” (*augere*) to the already constituted tradition? The “author” will have to turn into a *modernist* museum curator.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, Rabaté points out that Clement Greenberg’s rigorously phenomenological framing of modernist aesthetics in the visual arts is grounded in a selective use of Kant’s aesthetic theory that steers clear of the notion of the sublime—to be harnessed by Lyotard

in his conceptualization of the postmodern. Thus whatever threatens to smuggle in too much negativity (Duchamp, conceptual art) is excluded from “core” Modernism by Greenberg (though not by Adorno), creating a dual account of Modernist aesthetics and preparing the ground for the procedures of “cutting Modernism in half,” for Modernism’s many postmodernisms.<sup>52</sup>

### Modernism as critical idiom

**T**HIS LOGICALLY leads to the acknowledgement that the modern movement cannot be separated from its canonization by the academia and by critics; Modernist literature was creatively re-read/repositioned, flying by the (conceptual) nets of theory—in both senses of the word. From its inception, Modernism has eminently relied on its authors’ ability to set the terms of their own artistic/textual practices, and to educate the tastes of their readers/spectators; its canonization depended from the late 1940s on the critical interpretation of texts and theory, and on the interpenetration of the two, witnessed in the work of crossover artists like T.S. Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and critics and philosophers like Benjamin, Adorno, Greenberg, Herbert Read, Richard Ellmann, Hugh Kenner.<sup>53</sup> Since its constitution as a field of study, Modernism studies has been closely linked to post/structuralist theory, in a mutual exploitation of concepts, procedures and textual (visual) practices: as early as 1993 Modernism was recognized to be not only a way of writing but also one of reading, a critical idiom, and formalist criticism recognized as a continuation of, or second-shot, modernism.<sup>54</sup> However, New Criticism is only the beginning of the crystallization of an essentially Modernist critical practice and idiom, bound up with the (fiction of) aesthetic autonomy, a set of assumptions first openly propagated by the *fin-de-siècle* art for art’s sake movement, according to which literature is independent of external circumstances and any obligations and purposes that might derive from those circumstances. This independence arrives at forms of tautological self-justification (as demonstrated in Clark’s anatomy of Cubist painting)—as seen in the caricature version of modernism presented in Orwell’s essay “Inside the Whale” when the aspiring young writer, asked by his aunt what he is to write about, answers indignantly, “My dear aunt, one doesn’t write *about* anything, one just *writes*.”<sup>55</sup> The extreme form of autonomy, according to Andrew Goldstone, is the (fiction of) freedom from referentiality, whereby the modern (American) university and institutionalized “High Theory” became the substitute of a real-world audience for nonreferential literary practices and theories of language.<sup>56</sup> This general theory of literature’s autonomy from reference finds its logical end point in Paul de Man’s absolutization of rhetorical reading and claim that, insofar as dependent on language/figuration, philosophy shares the condition of literature.<sup>57</sup> De Man’s work, Goldstone writes,

constitutes a case for the distinctiveness of literary—especially poetic—language on the basis of its elusiveness and nonreferentiality; his career played a significant part in establishing a new academic formation that claimed equality with or even supremacy over philosophy ... De Man’s modernism, unlike his own

general principles but like the fictions of other writers... reconstructs autonomy as a way literature connects to its historical contexts—despite its resistance to external referentiality.<sup>58</sup>

More than that, aesthetic formalism and its ideology of aesthetic autonomy (finding its culmination point in “High Theory”) fully partake in, and reproduce, the paradoxes around Modernism’s self-definition. As Jonathan Loesberg demonstrates, the latter is indebted to the theories of the preceding 150 years of philosophy—particularly to the aesthetic philosophy of Kant and Hegel—and thus bound to get entangled in their contradictions: since Hegel’s (historical) claim is that his theory was written as a culmination of art and after its end, Modernism, rooted in Hegel’s (mis)reading of Kant, cannot but see itself as “both the essence of art and the end of art.”<sup>59</sup>

Since beauty in Kant and, by consequence, the artworks that display it are endless and thus without history, while in Hegel, because beauty is a surpassed form of expression and the art that displays it, having reached its terminal point, is a thing of the past, it will follow that any new art form that thinks of itself as an art, and any new art theory that would accommodate that form as an historical inauguration, if they are to build on Kant’s and Hegel’s definitions, will have to rewrite their terms. In order to be a different form of the art they described, a new form of art will reinscribe their contradictions while declaring itself both a new beginning and a new end. At least, that has been the case... with both modernism and postmodernism. And theories of art that attempt to rewrite a history that will accommodate those claims, as it turns out, reinscribe the contradictions in their histories.<sup>60</sup>

This way, the anatomy of the conceptual frameworks and critical idiom of modernism takes one back to the essential divide in modernist aesthetics, which also translates as a questioning of the validity of chronologies of modernism: if the modern/avant-garde movement contained within it a formalist aestheticism (starting from late-19th century Impressionist painting and aestheticist literature) alongside procedures of contesting and questioning that formalism (through tearing down cultural barriers, methods of pastiche, metafiction, radical language scepticism, etc.), the boundary between “Modernism” and its post-modernism(s) becomes more elusive/volatile than ever.



## Notes

1. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (London: Picador, 1985), 35.
2. Charles Jencks, *Critical Modernism: Where is post-modernism going?* (London: Wiley, 2007), 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?”; “A Note on the Meaning of ‘Post’” [1979], in Th. Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Harvester

- Wheatsleaf, 1993); see Jean-Michel Rabaté's recent reconsideration of the placement of Beckett, and his theorists Bataille and Blanchot, within a paradigm of postwar late modernism, in *Think, Pig!* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).
5. Cf. Jencks' set of binary opposites: "America is modern, Europe is post-modern; the Ford Motor Company was modern, Amazon is post-modern; Tony Blair is modern (or, so at least is his mantra), Gorbachev was pm after a fashion; 'capitalism' and 'socialism' were modern when they were first used in 1810 and now the hybrid 'socialism' is pm; Camembert is modern, Cambozola is pm and the very recent Camelbert (like Brie but from camel milk) is very pm; Auschwitz was modern, Shock and Awe featured on television was post-modern; Minimalism is modern, Picasso was both." *Critical Modernism*, 15.
  6. Technological advances have engendered Gilles Lipovetsky's construction of the *hypermodern*, philosopher Alan Kirby's *digimodernism*, or cultural theorist Robert Samuels' *automodernism*. The concept *altermodernism*, proposed by Curator Nicolas Bourriaud who curated the fourth Tate Triennial at Tate Modern (*Altermodern*, 2009: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern>) creates a cultural space for a new sense of planetary negotiation between identities, for hybridization in the age of global migration.
  7. See the Stuckist manifesto at <http://www.stuckism.com/>, and in *The Stuckists: The First Remodernist Art Group*, ed. Katherine Evans (London: Victoria, 2000), 6-11.
  8. See Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?" [2007], and Josh Toth, "The passing of Postmodernism: Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary" [2010], in David Rudrum and Nichoas Stavris (eds.), *Supplanting the Postmodern. An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century* (New York—London: Bloomsbury, 2015). E-book.
  9. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" [2010], in David Rudrum and Nichoas Stavris (eds.), *Supplanting the Postmodern*.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Steven Connor, "Postmodernism Grown Old," in David Rudrum and Nichoas Stavris (eds.), *Supplanting the Postmodern*.
  12. Ibid.
  13. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.
  14. Jencks, *Critical Modernism*, 19.
  15. Ibid.
  16. Ibid., 9.
  17. I am using the term of Fokkema and Ibsch. As distinct from Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism, "core" Modernism is marked by a preference for narrative prose, which depicts scepticism, a provisional, fragmentary interpretation of the world, and whose interest is primarily focused on the ways in which knowledge of the world can be worded and transmitted, while the actual transfer of knowledge is at most of secondary importance: Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch (eds.), *Modernist Conjectures. A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 4.
  18. See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture. Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). See also Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University Press, 1993), 85-93.
  19. Ibid., 17.
  20. Peter Childs's *Modernist Literature: A Guide for the Perplexed*. (London, New York: Continuum, 2011).
  21. Philip Tew, Andrew Murray (eds.), *The Modernism Handbook* (London, New York: Continuum, 2009).

22. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 29.
23. *Modernist Conjectures*, 17.
24. Jencks, *Critical Modernism*, 22.
25. <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/MrBennettAndMrsBrown.pdf>
26. Rabaté, *1913*, 33.
27. *Ibid.*, 14.
28. *Ibid.*, 3.
29. Similar approaches are found in Marjorie Perloff's seminal investigation of a "Futurist" sensibility in pre-WWI Europe, productive of avant-garde "languages of rupture:" *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago University Press, 2004), or in Frederic Morton's anatomy of Viennese culture in 1913-14: *Thunder at Twilight: Vienna 1913/1914* (Da Capo Press, 2001). See also the anatomy of Modernism's *annus mirabilis*: Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.), *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).
30. Rabaté, *1913*, 5, 11.
31. *Ibid.*, 45.
32. Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 1999), 3.
33. *Ibid.*, 9.
34. According to Clark, socialism "was one of the forces, maybe *the* force, that made for the falsely polarized choice which modernism believed it had before it—between idealism and materialism, or *Urbemensch* and *lumpen*, or esoteric and popular." *Farewell to an Idea*, 9.
35. *Ibid.*, 175.
36. *Ibid.*, 179.
37. *Ibid.*, 179-80.
38. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" [1967], in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), 62-76.
39. Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).
40. "L'Épuisé" ("The Exhausted"), in Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, Michael A. Greco, Anthony Uhlmann (London: Verso, 1998): 152-174.
41. *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Ohio State University Press, 1987). In *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975) Hassan already designates Beckett a postmodernist, in line with David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Chicago University Press, 1972).
42. Rüdiger Imhof, *Contemporary Metafiction. A poetological study of metafiction in English since 1939* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1986).
43. Lois Oppenheim, "Situating Samuel Beckett," *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. Moragh Shiach (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 224-237.
44. Steven Connor, "Postmodernism and Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge University Press, 2004) 62-81, 70.
45. Steven Connor, "Postmodernism and Literature," 70.
46. *Ibid.*, 70-71.
47. See, for instance, Matei Călinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Gard, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987). See also Sam Slote's dissection of the dual construction of "Modernism" and "Postmodernism(s)" in "Thoroughly Modern Modernism. Modernism and Its Postmodernisms," *Modernism* (John Benjamins, 2007), 233-249.
48. Cf. Hans Lethen, "Modernism Cut in Half: The Exclusion of the Avantgarde and the Debate on Postmodernism," in Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (eds.), *Approaching Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 236. Susan Suleiman ("Naming the Difference:

- reflections on ‘Modernism versus Postmodernism’ in literature,” *ibid.*, 265) voices the same argument, drawing attention to the fact that much of the “Modernism/Postmodernism” debate is a characteristically Anglo-American dispute, since most of the European avant-garde movements never penetrated into Britain/ America, so the version of Modernism that came to dominate the Anglophone academy reflects a conservative perspective.
49. The strategy can be extended to literary history at large, resolving Modernist canon into a complex series of historical shifts and reversals that later came to be effaced by the inauguration of a Modernist “orthodoxy:” cf. Michael Levenson, *The Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).
  50. “Modernist Studies,” in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt & Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992).
  51. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ghosts of Modernity* (University Press of Florida, 1996), 188-189.
  52. See Jean-Michel Rabaté’s Introduction to *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 9.
  53. *Ibid.*, 5-9.
  54. Kevin Dettmar (ed.), *Revealing the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism* (The University of Michigan Press, 1993). See also Kevin Dettmar, *The Illicit Joy of Postmodernism* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996): “Modernism is not just a style of creative writing, but equally a style of critical writing, even critical thinking... One measure of modernism’s ascendancy in the academy is precisely that once it had been forged as a discourse in the arts, critics learned to speak modernism very quickly” (5).
  55. <http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/orwell/>
  56. Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
  57. Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
  58. Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy*, 167-169.
  59. Jonathan Loesberg, “Aesthetic Formalism, the Form of Artworks, and Formalist Criticism,” in Rabaté (ed.), *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, 415.
  60. *Ibid.*, 418.

### Abstract

#### Chronologies of Modernism: factoids, fictions, accounts

The present article addresses the problems of setting up definitive chronological frameworks of modernism/the international modern movement: it points at the asynchronicities between the histories of the visual arts, architecture, and literature, addressing some of the lacunae of mainstream accounts of (European) modernism, and offers up for consideration simultaneist mappings of modernism by scholars like J M Rabaté. Most importantly, it shows the multiple ways in which chronologies are intertwined with considerations of aesthetics/poetics, especially with a view to the modernist/postmodernist divide.

### Keywords

modernism, postmodernism, chronology, prefix-modernisms, critical modernism, Beckett.