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TOTAL MODERNISM

Introduction

The 1922 modernist centenary prompts the thematic for this special issue. One hundred years on, we might call the past century the modernist century. And with good reason too. 1922 marks neither the birth of modernism nor its comprehensive scope, yet the aesthetic innovations that occurred a century ago still, for many, feel fresh and vital, a sentiment which extends beyond the academy into mainstream culture. A quick glance at some high-profile public and mass media publications in the UK – where the modernist *annus mirabilis* remains a feted, if not a mystical, event – reveals as much. On 30 January 2022, *The New Statesman*, with “1922: the Year that made Modernism”, re-endowed 1922 with the cultural capital that has long gathered around it: “1922 still looks like the year literature changed, when literature came into its own”, writes John Mullan. Later in 2022, the BBC launched a seven-part mini-series, *1922: The Birth of Now*, which took account of a host of the innovations and discoveries from what they dubbed “the crucial year of modernism”. Taking a wide-angle view, the series situates Eliot’s “The Waste Land” alongside the discovery of the tomb of Tutankahmun, the chilling psychodrama of blood-lust, *Nosferatu*, as well as Louis Armstrong’s move from New Orleans to Chicago. Moreover, in 2022, the *London Review of Books* rendered its homage to 1922 by publishing a collection of essays entitled *That Year Again: Writing about 1922*, which was edited by Tom McCarthy, a writer often labelled as channelling modernism’s energies in his “neo-modernist” fictions.

With such awe and reverie facing 1922, we may ask: have we become over-enamoured with modernism’s defining year? That is to say: have we raised 1922 on a culture industry pedestal that occludes other moments of rich literary production and social and political turmoil? Thus, treading a little suspiciously, we might ask: did 1922 really mark the birth, and constitute the origin, of year 1 of the new (as Ezra Pound suggested in the 1922 spring issue of *The Little Review*)? Does modernism constitute a narrative arc which takes one hundred years into its remit and facilitate its description with certain forms of thinking? Have we fallen prey to the seemingly totalising structures of ‘high’ modernist fiction – in *Ulysses*, James Joyce, as critics from Hermann Broch to Jean-Michel Rabaté (2015, 4) have suggested, produces a total reality by producing a universal work of art through a universalized everyday which coheres into a cultural world – by reproducing modernism as a totality which accounts for all artistic experimentation, and in-debts all

future readers, in advance? In turn, we might consider: how, and by what conceptual logic, might we today link modernism with ideas of totality? Moreover, we might conjecture: what does a modernist totality mean in the third decade of the 21st century?

The 2022 *Modernist Studies Association* conference, which took place in Portland Oregon, sought to question the inevitable reverential celebrations of modernism's annus mirabilis. That conference asked: should we enthrone or dethrone 1922 as *the* major modernist moment? More an ambition than an achievement of the conference, this question came on the back of the success of the new modernist studies, which has pushed against the institutionalisation and crowning of a robust and muscular European white-male modernism. Over the last thirty years, since the first publication of *Modernism/modernity* in 1994, the vertical and temporal expansion of the field of modernist studies has softened our gaze on what was, and still is, perceived as a narrow 'high modernism'. The apex of this scholarly initiative was perhaps Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (2015), which described modernism as the aesthetic expression of any given modernity. In Friedman's terms, the aesthetic works of Tang Dynasty China and the Mongolian steppe became amenable to the modernist canon. A controversial and feted work, Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms* sought to free modernism from its European trappings. In doing so, however, it replaced one form of modernist totality with another: the labelling of any aesthetic experimentation from anywhere and from any time as modernist.

Similarly, Paul Saint-Amour's 'weak modernism' endeavour, which appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, sought to account for "generations who understood themselves as extending rather than negating the work of modernist forebears" and "whole areas of study that have lately become important in our field, including the everyday, the domestic, the affective, the middlebrow, the infrastructural, the doctrinal" (Saint-Amour 2018, 437). Notwithstanding, Saint-Amour's recommendation of a weak modernism also came with an important reservation. He writes: "When it comes to fields of study, there can be a disquietingly short distance from hospitality to hostile takeover, from 'all are welcome here' to 'all are incorporated here,' even 'all are appropriated here'" (*Ib.*, 453). He thus continues: "It would be a terrible irony – and, worse, both intellectually and ethically noxious – if a field expansion made possible by a certain weakness-in theory were to result in a homogenizing triumphalism fed by the annexation of others' intellectual resources, spaces, voices, and rights-of-way" (*Ib.*). In such terms, Saint-Amour warns against replacing one form of totalising modernism with another modernist discourse which accumulates nearly all artistic and cultural production under its banner.

Indeed, this sentiment has long been harboured by many modernist studies scholars. Suspicious of new forms of totality of which modernist studies seems capable in the 21st century, many critics hold to the period 1890-1940 as the quintessential modernist decades. By extension, other literary periods, such as the romantic and contemporary, for example, remain to be understood in and through their own terms. David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014, 88), for instance, suggest that 'modernism' should still be

understood in historically conditioned and culturally specific clusters of artistic achievements between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. As they launch their idea of ‘metamodernism’ – a contemporary literary mode concerned with the reception and reactivation of modernist aesthetics – James and Seshagiri note that “without a temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers” (*Ib.*). This gesture, however, does not necessarily come with the enthroning of the ‘high modernism’ of 1922, or the ‘men of 1914’, at the pinnacle of the modernist canon. For James and Seshagiri, and for many other modernist studies scholar, the new modernist studies has left an important and indelible mark on the field, prompting us to return again and again to the 1890-1940 modernist window – if it is not now the 1850-1970 window (Charles Baudelaire, of course, remains for many an origin to literary modernism, while Samuel Beckett was still writing throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s) – to rethink its parameters and the received wisdoms, old and new, which dictate its reception.

And so we now find ourselves in a period of flux in modernist studies. As ideology critique is on the wane across literary studies at large, so too are the attendant suppositions of the historicist reading strategies, inspired by Stephen Greenblatt’s new historicism and Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism, which have constituted the foundation of the research that has been gathered under the umbrella of the new modernist studies. In a moment of methodological proliferation in literary and modernist studies – prompted by the coterminous rise of affect theory, world literature paradigms, ecocriticism, critical race theories, critical future studies, as well as postcritique, amongst others – one specific mode of reading is now unlikely to enjoy the institutional prestige that historicist and postcolonial models have held since the 1990s, and that deconstructive strategies enjoyed before that. As a result, the ideologies of our recently dominant historicist and materialist paradigms have come under scrutiny. Just as historicist critics somewhat misleadingly labelled deconstructive modes as abortive, vapid and without political purchase, so too are we now seeing a questioning of the assumptions of those modes of reading which have been at the forefront of literary studies over the past three decades. One such example concerns the place of formalism in modernist studies. Prompted by the agenda of the new modernist studies, the riposte to formalist modes of textual analysis over the last thirty years has been based on the idea that such methodologies have occluded the cultural, historical and political contexts and gestures of literary texts. In such terms, the New Critics – from I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and Hugh Kenner – have been denoted as celebrating modernist texts as autotelic forms, autonomous structures and taut unities which maintain an independence from the historical and political world. Formalism, by these lights, becomes an alienated and introspective mode of reading. As per recent criticism, however, such narratives might be specious, if not straw-man arguments. Scholars such as Caroline Levine, David James and Cara Lewis, all working, broadly speaking, under the banner of ‘new formalism’, have recently considered the fate of, and given new vigour

to, these seeming ghosts of literary and modernist studies. On the fate and place of close reading in modernist studies today, James suggests, in his recent volume *Modernism and Close Reading*, that the unhelpful association of modes of close reading of aesthetics, form, genre and structure with the perceived bourgeois proclivities of New Criticism remains an unhelpful argument in the field, one which, as Douglas Mao (1996, 237) has suggested, “perpetuates the myths of New Critical ontological naïveté and of a direct connection between the hypostatization of the text and antihistoricism”. Pertinently, these reconsiderations of the practice and value of close reading and the rise of the new formalist studies have explored the ethical and political currency of the analysis of aesthetics and form, and how form relates to historical and political cultures. Thus, as these critics suggest, forms of close reading remain useful rather than inimical to the analysis of the relationship between (experimental modes of representation) and their historical contexts. Moreover, the recent success of Timothy Bewes’s new book *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* – which has won the USA National Book Critics Circle “Award for Criticism”, and which was endorsed as a revolutionary moment in novel theory by prominent critics such as Merve Emre, Jed Esty and Sianne Ngai – would suggest that formalism and aesthetic autonomy, at least in the language that Bewes proposes and presents, are very much back in vogue. And indeed, more radical than Levine, James, Lewis, Bewes does not allow for a link between form and history. His category of postfiction suggests that the universalization of free indirect discourse, which is otherwise known for Bewes as the collapse of the logic of instantiation, marks an escape on the part of literature from the regimes of signification, point of view, and thus criticism itself (106). In such terms, for Bewes, the content of the contemporary novel “is not graspable as an object” (5). Such a shift in criticism returns us to the question of aesthetic autonomy, and thus totality. This issue of *Cosmo* responds to such complex critical heritages by returning to the pairing of modernism and totality. Specifically, it considers modernisms variegated relation to various forms of totality (critical, formal, historical, political, philosophical).

1922 affords a departure point for exploring this difficult association. The central thematic for the *1922/2022 Total Modernism: Continuity, Discontinuity and the Experimental Turn* conference held in Turin in May 2022 – from which our investigations began and from which the work collected in these pages grew – raised an important question concerning a total modernism: does 1922 cohere around, and galvanize, a set of forces which might be labelled as the ‘the birth of Now’, or ‘the year that made modernism’? On the latter question, Michael North, in *Reading 1922* (1999), tells us that such a totalising task is easier said than realized. Indeed, how could one account in an all-encompassing manner for the diverse range of important works conceived, written, or completed in that year? A brief list of some of the major artistic and theoretical innovations and interventions published in 1922 reveal the polythetic and disparate concerns encompassed by the umbrella of ‘high modernism’. In the literary canon, we read T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Franz Kafka’s *Das Schloss*, Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party*, Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*,

Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. In the visual arts, we can note Paul Klee's *Twittering Machine*, Salvador Dalí's *Cabaret Scene*, Pablo Picasso's *Two Women Running on the Beach*, and Wassily Kandinsky's *Untitled*, which marked his transition from an expressionist to a constructivist aesthetic. 1922 was also the moment of various important philosophical and theoretical works, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Viktor Shlovsky's elaboration of 'defamiliarisation' towards a theory of prose, Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id*, Henri Bergson's *Durée et simultanéité*, Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's development of "significant form", Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, as well as I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden's *The Foundation of Aesthetics*. Just as importantly, 1922 saw the emergence of other crucial cultural productions that the canon of modernism has been slow, or reluctant, to incorporate, such as cinema, cabaret, dance, popular music. Far from an exhaustive account, the works and initiatives listed here amount to only a minor portion of the cultural works produced in 1922. Synthesizing and totalising 1922, even just with these named works in mind, seems an already impossible task. Indeed, North points out that irreparable omissions occur whenever one sets oneself the task of reading the major and minor works of one calendar year. And, moreover, that one must stretch the limits of the calendar year in question to include relevant examples and questions which its limits can only superficially obscure. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, which strives for totality without achieving or enacting its form, modernism is more an unfinishable archive than a master form, a vantage point which provides the impetus for the essays gathered in this issue.

The *Headlines* section contains two contributions. Jean-Michel Rabaté's article discusses a wide range of modernist 'texts', spanning Eugène Ionesco to Léon Daudet, Hermann Broch as a reader of Joyce to Marcel Duchamp. Intertwining his critical analysis with acute political insights on the material and political conditions of the modernist contexts examined, Rabaté shows how discussions of modernism have radically developed from a 'high versus low' debate about its forms and expressions. In turn, he describes modernism as an unfinishable project, and thus that which can never become a totality.

Peter Nicholls's contribution considers a different timeline of modern literature (1822-1922) by comparing two poems: Giacomo Leopardi's "Alla primavera, o delle favole antiche" (1822) and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Despite their remarkable differences, and Eliot's lack of interest for Leopardi's poetry, these poems share a common concern with the reappropriation of myth, classicism, and romanticism, thus exemplifying a development from 'modern' to 'modernist' works.

Raffaele Donnarumma's article opens the *Focus* section of this issue. Through Freud, Donnarumma analyses how the modernist novel reframes centuries-long epistemological questions concerning the relation between the subject and truth, and the problem of not wanting to know. Donnarumma argues that the modernist character (exemplified by Thomas Mann's *Thomas Buddenbrook*, Henry James' *Lambert Strether*, and Italo Svevo's *Zeno Cosini*) either actively refuses to accept the truths that

unfold in front of them, or metaphorically blinds themselves in order to avoid confrontation with those truths. While Mann's and James's inept protagonists implicitly assign a fundamental weight to truth precisely when they negate it, Zeno's words and (in)actions seem to consider truth as simply useless for life. In Donnarumma's vision, Zeno therefore represents a modernist, and ethically problematic, shift from truth as a fundamental reference for Western epistemology and social life, to a post-Nietzschean nihilism.

Thomas Macho's article starts with a reading and comment on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Ego and the Id*. Macho highlights the relevance of these Freudian texts for the emergence of the present-day developments of the sub-genre of the vampire story. In doing so, Macho highlights how vampire stories have increasingly played a role in the representation of what one could call a 'political unconscious' of the Western masses, with vampires often standing for a rich, suicidal and decadent capitalist elite, while zombies and/or werewolves allegorize a no longer self-conscious class of proletarians.

Joseph Cermatori's contribution takes into consideration the philosophical relevance of Walter Benjamin's 1922 announcement of a (never realized) journal called *Angelus Novus*. Cermatori's analysis invites us to rethink an allegedly "minor" moment of Benjamin's development as a thinker. In a moment in which Benjamin is involved with the ultimately failed attempt of creating a journal, as well as with the development of his doctoral dissertation, "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism", Benjamin is developing, Cermatori shows, foundational aspects of his philosophy concerning the role of the editor as a quest for universality, and the broader political and cultural crisis in the West at the time.

Mimmo Cangiano focuses on how a considerable segment of European right-wing culture in the first half of the 20th century abandons its traditional anti-modern positions and rhetoric to find its own way into modernity and modernism. Interweaving analysis of texts by authors such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Léon Bloy, Gottfried Benn, and Ernst Jünger, Cangiano offers an original perspective into how European right-wing culture managed to reconcile (albeit in theoretically frail and self-justifying manners) myth with industrialisation and totalitarianism with poetry.

Ilaria Natali shifts the focus of this issue to the Anglophone context by reading Jennifer Egan's 2022 novel *The Candy House* in relation to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Natali argues that Egan's novel not only reframes and reuses modernist techniques (such as the reproduction and integration of technology-based dialogues and rhythms within the literary text), but it also offers critical insight into the relevance of Joyce's *Ulysses* as a repertoire for our contemporary and ever-developing literary canon.

Wei Zhou's article examines how Eliot's "The Waste Land" proves to be a source of remarkable reference for the condition of women and gender imbalances during and in the wake of World War I. By unearthing allusions to soldiers' PTSD and their effects on marital sexual life, as well as to illegal abortions in "A Game of Chess", Zhou shows how

the masculine narrative of *nostos* (with its illustrious classic models) is domesticated and reassembled within the boundaries of the traditionally feminine space of the home.

Andrea Brondino's article focuses on how the reception of romantic irony influences the use of the term "irony" as a key evaluative term in modernism and New Criticism. While authors such as Ezra Pound, André Breton, Walter Benjamin and Thomas Mann closely link irony to artistic intelligence, new critics such as Cleanth Brooks explicitly define irony as an ambiguous, albeit pivotal, sign of value judgment of a literary text. Brondino's argument is that irony, far from being a descriptive or neutral term in contemporary literary criticism, bears evaluative and culturally specific connotations that should raise suspicion about the allegedly impartial position of a critic towards a text.

Robin Hueppe shifts the focus to architecture. Hueppe discusses Berlin and Brasilia as a double, albeit largely unfinished case of modernist urbanism. He argues that beyond its negative connotations, heavily linked to the complex political, economic, and social contexts in which modernist urbanism was born, especially in a 21st-century globalized world afflicted by the problem of rising cost of housing and a growing population, modernist urbanism can still provide a model for present and future city planning.

Antonio Dall'Igna's philosophical essay compares the diverging figures of Ernst Jünger and Simone Weil. Despite different interests and political allegiances, Jünger and Weil share a common philosophical focus around the problem of "work", intended mainly as an exercise in reading, interpreting, and modifying reality. For both authors, Dall'Igna shows, work can lead the subject to a higher epistemological, as well as spiritual degree: while Weil interprets this supreme ascension as a mystical silence, Jünger interprets it as a form of dominion (another chapter, one could say, of the European right-wing culture dissected in Cangiano's article).

Camilla Balbi and Marcello Sessa bring to the fore how Carl Einstein and Clement Greenberg offer an unusual interpretation of Wassily Kandinsky's art by stressing its anti-modernist features (such as Kandinsky's residual and persistent continuation of the figurative tradition). Through a reading of Einstein's and Greenberg's comments on Kandinsky's work, Balbi and Sessa highlight how these critics tackle the orthodoxies and failures of modernism.

The *Percorsi* section contains three articles. In the first one, Richard Hardack analyses Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* as a form of total modernism that incorporates postmodernism. Taking account of ideas of an ongoing modernism, one which continues into the 21st century, Hardack argues that Pynchon's use of modern(ist) scientific conceptions of time and space make modernism the renewed centre for an after-modernist aesthetics.

Pasquale Fameli's contribution focuses on László Moholy-Nagy's 1922 conceptualization of artistic production and reproduction. Moholy-Nagy thought that the gramophone, cinema, and photography provided unique chances for the reformulation of established formal relations that link artistic representation to a 'realist' reproduction of reality. The artist should, according to Moholy-Nagy, strive for the discovery of the specificity of the medium. However, Fameli argues, later developments

of the European avant-garde provide a counterargument to Moholy-Nagy's claims; namely, that the after-modernist artist is more involved in the overcoming of the specificity of a medium, rather than in the fulfillment of its inherent potentiality.

Finally, Leonardo Piana's article examines the Welsh poet and painter David Jones. A World War One veteran involved in collective artistic endeavours, Jones develops a modernist poetics in his painting and religious engravings. Transformed by the reading of "The Waste Land", read by Jones as a perfect expression of the existential and material disaster of the Great War, Jones publishes an epic poem that brings back Eliot's urban "waste land" to the actual waste land of the trenches. Piana's article reads Jones' literary and figurative works together, provides an intertextual analysis of Jones' poem in relation with Eliot's "The Waste Land", and assesses how the categories of myth and remembrance are reframed and repurposed by Jones.

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