

# MODERNIST CULTURAL STUDIES



Catherine Driscoll

## Modernist Cultural Studies



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Catherine Driscoll

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For Norman Clare Talbot,  
who first gave me *Finnegans Wake*.  
I miss you.

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

In 1992, I arrived at the University of Melbourne fresh from a very traditional literary undergraduate education. I arrived in a department that had recently changed its name from the Department of English to the Department of English with Cultural Studies. At the time it was by no means agreed upon, even among scholars who affiliated themselves with the term, that cultural studies was a “discipline,” or even that it should be one, and my comprehension of what cultural studies did or referred to was at best sketchy. As a Joyce scholar, I vaguely suspected that it would not like me very much. In fact, my first encounter with cultural studies in practice was not a very reassuring one. At the welcoming party for new (post)graduate students, a not entirely sober student with an awe-inspiring two years of seniority accused me, much to his amusement and my confusion, of being an “unreconstructed Leavisite.” So my first exploration of cultural studies was designed to discover what an “unreconstructed Leavisite” might mean and whether I wanted to be one. Sixteen years later, I am still not entirely sure.

As I write this preface, the department where I first met cultural studies has changed its name to the School of Culture and Communication, and I am now chair of a department that has only recently managed to wrest the title “Cultural Studies” from years of negotiations over who does cultural studies and whether or not it is (still) worth doing. The negotiations traced in these shifts provide a crucial context for this book and lay out the audiences for whom I have written it. I do now see “cultural studies” as the field from and to which I primarily write. But I have never found my training in modernist literature to be anything but an asset to research and teaching in cultural studies.

I feel very strongly that practitioners of cultural studies should better understand the modernist context in which the key tools and many of the canonical works of their discipline emerged. And more scholars working on modernism should be able to both think critically about how and why they use that term as a description of something that has now past and understand how particular theories about culture that they share with cultural studies ground their work. This book is thus both an account of modernism for cultural studies and an account of cultural studies for modernist studies. I think this aim alone would be worthwhile because it seems to me that these fields still routinely and willfully misunderstand one another. But I have a further aim—to make a case for the importance of understanding ourselves as modernist. Even for those who find claims about our “postmodernity” passé, opaque, or otherwise frustrating, this might seem a counter-productive aim. But I not only want to understand what modernism and cultural studies mean to each other but also to insist on their ongoing importance for cultural analysis today.

This book has been a long time in the making and many people have helped in ways I could not have done without. Thanks to David Bennett, Melissa Gregg, Meaghan Morris, Elspeth Probyn, Russell Smith, and especially Ken Ruthven. Thank you to my students, past and present, and to my colleagues and staff in the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney. This project was also supported by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and by the literature program at Duke University where I spent a sabbatical. I must also thank the University Press of Florida, especially Amy Gorelick, for wanting to publish this work, and Penelope Cray, for her careful reading and advice. Finally, no book appears without many kinds of personal support for which it is especially hard to give adequate thanks. Reams of gratitude are due to Judith Driscoll, Sean Fuller, Morgan Howard, and Ruth Talbot-Stokes.

# Introduction

## The Critical Attitude

*What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?*

Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?"

There is an enormous amount of literature on and around the subject of "modernism." In academic books and articles, reviews and magazine columns, exhibition catalogues and liner notes, and elucidating comments across many media, references to modernism tell a story that is broadly consistent, however many fine distinctions and heated debates follow from it. In this story, "modernism" is a movement that began in the early twentieth century, generally reaching a crescendo between the two world wars, in which "modernists" radically transformed the ways in which all forms of art were produced and understood. In modernism we thus find radical aesthetic movements like Cubism in painting or the skyscraper in architecture. Sometimes that story extends beyond aesthetics to politics and science, for example, or to less specialized aesthetics, like advertising or fashion.

This story is worth knowing, publications on the topic generally agree, because modernism had such broad and lasting impact on what Western culture thinks is valuable, beautiful, culturally inevitable, and socially important. For example, modernism reinvented art as something worth doing and talking about in revolutionary terms. But this story about "modernism" describes something that happened in the past, even if its after-effects continue to be important. According to this story, modernism was displaced, or at very least radically transformed, in the years after World War II. Since then, new forms of art and media have emerged that, while developing out of modernism, are better understood as belonging to "postmodernism." An

associated story about postmodernism has thus emerged, in which, for example, “art” is no more important than any other kind of cultural activity, including the most popular and the least specialized, such as sport or television. This is the case because no shared overarching understanding of “art” or its uses is now possible. And as the changes called “modernism” included new ways of thinking about culture—like German critical theory or formalist literary criticism—“postmodernism,” too, advances its own kinds of cultural analysis. “Cultural Studies” exemplifies this “postmodern” cultural analysis, supposedly abandoning value distinctions between different kinds of culture to manifest a scholarly field that deems everything equally worthy of analysis.

I summarize this well-known story in these crude terms not to begin yet another book on how modernism is hard to define, or, for that matter, easy to define. Nor is this a book that aims to redefine the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Many scholars have shown how the roots of modernism reach well into the nineteenth century, and even farther back. Many others have questioned whether the definitive postmodern break or turn frequently proposed in the 1980s and 90s ever actually transpired. While I refer to many of these arguments, my aim here is quite different. I do want to argue that modernism is not a thing of the past, but I want to do so by showing that cultural studies as a discipline—and before that as an interdisciplinary field—might well be considered a modernist project. I think that understanding the modernism of cultural studies is both necessary for seeing and sustaining the value of cultural studies and reinvigorates the importance of modernism today.

This argument is less a plea for (slightly) more established disciplines to take cultural studies seriously than it is a plea for contemporary humanities and social sciences, including cultural studies, to take modernism seriously. I thus want to intervene in the now habitual association between the “new humanities” and postmodernism, a move that sets cultural studies and modernism in opposition to one another, with modernism being situated as the kind of serious cultural project that cultural studies has either abandoned or was never able to access. The effect of this association is to make cultural studies seem superficial and modernism seem redundant; these are the claims against which this book is opposed. That tidy story about modernism as a past movement obscures many things, including the extent to which the famous debates and motifs of modernism are both familiar and important to us today. Thus, even as *Modernist Cultural Studies* mounts an argument about the history and content of cultural studies, it speaks equally

to what has been monumentalized as modernism by decades of textbooks, lectures, and catalogues.

The following chapters thus revisit modernism in the light of contemporary cultural studies, looking for how cultural studies might understand modernism differently. Each chapter has more or less the same purpose, discussing the interdependence of modernism and cultural studies from a series of different perspectives. Taken together, these perspectives, or lines of inquiry, assemble a rather different story about modernism than the one I sketched above. In this alternate story, modernism is defined by the way it understands and articulates both “culture” and the subjects that perceive and manifest culture. In this way I propose that cultural studies is a crucial continuation of modernism into the present. I will leave an overview of each chapter’s line of inquiry to the end of this introduction, however, because something else is necessary first. Given that I want to make an argument for a particular way of thinking about modernism, I cannot proceed without first offering a more careful definition of modernism than the broad-strokes story with which I began. And so the next section engages with one of the most slippery questions for modernist studies: what is “modernism” anyway?

### The Problem of Definition—Modernism

One of the first things that modernism and cultural studies have in common, and this is not at all a peripheral or minor similarity, is a persistent problem with definition. In considering the characteristic ways “modernism” and “cultural studies” refuse definition, this introduction also establishes how I will use these terms throughout the book. After all these years and all those books about modernism, we cannot simply ignore the story they hand down to us. Therefore, I need to find a way of engaging with it while assembling that alternate story of my own.

First of all, I will not consistently capitalize “modernism.” Despite the ease with which the term is used, there is little consensus about modernism except at the broadest level. Instead I will use two different terms: Modernism and modernism. I use “Modernism” to refer to the now institutionalized assemblage of generally aesthetic forms and practices that appeared (roughly) in the early twentieth century. “Modernism” in this sense is both the object and the product of all those readers and textbooks. While we might dispute the characteristics of this Modernism—which novels, which architects, which tendencies it should include—we cannot dispute that it



exists. I use Modernism with a capital M to refer to that certain object, but I use the uncanceled “modernism” to refer to an attitude to modernity that has much less temporal or formal coherence. This may seem unnecessarily complicated, but the distinction is important. Unless I find some way of marking this difference, every time I write “modernism” readers will read “Modernism” and yet no other term can now capture the attitude to modernity to which we continually refer. This pragmatic distinction therefore allows me to use “modernism” to name and discuss something almost permanently in dispute and “Modernism” to name the category that not only textbooks but also public and popular culture use as if it were agreed upon. By accepting that the canonized object (Modernism) and the ongoing critical attitude (modernism) can neither be reduced to the same thing nor separated entirely, perhaps we can move on to some other kind of discussion. Such a tactic is urgently needed because how to define modernism has come to absorb an inordinate amount of critical energy within modernist studies.

Many texts begin, to take Peter Childs’ *Modernism* (2006) as an exemplar, with “Answering the Question: What is Modernism?” (1). This question is almost always understood to be a periodizing one. Different authors and texts propose numerous beginning points for Modernism, making reference to different disciplines, figures, or themes. In literature, for example, we might begin with scandalous mid-nineteenth-century texts—*Madame Bovary* (1857) or *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1868)—or we might take a tighter historical view and begin with some stylistic exception like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Some such examples have become key to debating modernism, but acknowledging their role as place markers does not resolve the question of how to periodize modernism. For example, the social impact of the French Revolution of 1848 might be considered a crucial precursor to modernism by some scholars and a beginning point by others, while the influence of F. T. Marinetti’s “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (1909) might be positioned as either a beginning point or a crescendo. These two examples demonstrate that, while there is much disagreement about the periodization of modernism there is nevertheless solid consensus that, some time between the beginning of the twentieth century and World War II, Modernism definitely happened.

Nevertheless, very few elements of modernism are particular to Modernism whether they emerged, like manifestos and experimental photography, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or, like cinema and popular music, they dramatically appeared or changed direction in the Modernist

period but reached no apotheosis there. Virginia Woolf's famous assertion, often employed to signal a beginning point for Modernism, that "On or about December 1910 human character changed" ([1924] 1990: 634) indicates several crucial problems with attempts to periodize modernism. Her reference to the London exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" (1910) points to dramatic changes in early twentieth-century Western painting and attributes to them real insight into what had changed in the world. Woolf's claim is reinforced by her and her associates' significance to such discourse on "modern art" (the exhibition was, after all, curated by fellow "Bloomsberry," Roger Fry). But Woolf's claim is actually a retrospective one, made in May 1924 when life surely must have seemed different than it had in 1910. Woolf's statement is also an ironic one, and not only because of the war that dominated the intervening thirteen and a half years. Its claim to certainty in fact communicates both uncertainty about the present and anxiety about the future.

If Woolf's account of the Impressionists is taken to describe a Modernist vanguard, then Woolf herself joined the movement rather late. The paintings that struck her so forcibly as new were all nineteenth-century works, including paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne. Woolf herself belongs to a thread of modernism sometimes called "High Modernism," which refers to a coherent and spectacular form of Modernism between the wars. But debate persists even over what constitutes this apparently central phase of Modernism. For some writers, 1922 is the pinnacle of High Modernism, while for others the interwar period generates "heroic" modernism and High Modernism refers to its canonization after World War II. Woolf's statement neatly captures not only the radical difference attributed to Modernism—its definition as a break with the past—but also the limitations of any such definition. Thus, for our purposes, Woolf's famous comment is telling in several respects. It helps us to not only define Modernism as that subject of exhibitions, anthologies, and magazine articles framed as a concrete historical phase, but also to recognize the limits of what such periodization can tell us. It helps us define modernism as a critical attitude—as a mode of inquiry that escapes any such categorical dating.

The task of defining modernism is additionally complicated by other terms tangled up with it: modernity, late modernity, and modernization. As the title of the now influential journal *Modernism/Modernity* makes clear, for modernist studies today the concepts of modernity and Modernism need to be addressed together. But this has not involved giving up canoni-

cal Modernism. As Rita Felski argues, jettisoning the definition of “aesthetic modernism” by its use of “self-consciousness; simultaneity, juxtaposition and montage; paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty; and the dehumanization of the subject . . . is to render an already vague term effectively useless by robbing it of any meaningful referent” (1995: 25). Instead, Felski uses the term “modernity” to indicate the broader temporal frame in which this aesthetics emerges and to which Modernism responds. In another context, Felski describes the failure to distinguish between these terms as a “symptomatic confusion of a historical period (modernity) with an artistic movement (modernism)” (1994: 191). But this entanglement is complex. As Felski notes, “our own view of what modernity *is* has itself been influenced by the cultural power, prestige and visibility” of Modernism, and the Modernist “canon, paradoxically, is seen to provide a heightened perception of a historical reality that it has itself helped to construct” (191).

It is in the context of Modernism, then, that “modernity” generally refers to the emergence of a secularized human-centered world shaped by the scientific revolution, modern democracy, and the Industrial Revolution. Modernity thus comes to name a far greater breadth of time and range of objects and practices than Modernism, but only if we begin with a discourse on modernity that must itself be called modernism. Modernity might variously begin with the “Renaissance,” mean everything after “the Middle Ages,” begin with the “Enlightenment,” or involve all developments spawned by the modernization of politics and economy. It is certainly not helped to certainty by the evasiveness of all the terms by which modernity is itself periodized. But while modernity and Modernism are equally difficult to pin down to dates or events, and nevertheless impossible to distinguish entirely, the two are not synonyms. Indeed, Modernism has generally been seen as a historical break within the broader span of modernity—so that, for example, whether or not they are included in Modernism, the society *Madame Bovary* offended and the art both before and after the Impressionists were certainly part of “modernity.” It is in this context that the phrase “late modernity” has come to seem useful for talking about modernity during and after Modernism.<sup>1</sup>

“Late modernity” can be used to describe a shift in modernity’s conditions of production—one that marks the radical difference between a steel mill and a radio station or modern democracy as defined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau or by Ronald Reagan. The central distinction made with this term is usually an economic one: late modernity is the era of commodity capitalism rather than of the Industrial Revolution. But “late modernity” is also a

problematic term, for it attempts to push aside the importance of modernism to our contemporary discussions of modernity even as it intimates that the questions and changes that define modernity are ones now trailing off, fading away, or being displaced. “Modernization” seems to convey exactly this sort of progress narrative. Proceeding through industrialization, urbanization, and secularization in an unending line, modernization seems to demand a linear understanding of modernity. There may be crescendos and intermittent periods of slowness, but modernization appears to be an ongoing technologically determined process. And so it is. Given a sufficiently broad understanding of technology, modernization means the technologically determined progress of modernity. But grounded as it is in modernity, even modernization never manages to be simply linear. Only within modernity do we understand technological change as modernization. While the wheel, the aqueduct, and mathematics each constituted a technological change, they did not constitute modernization. Change is transformed into modernization by a shared sense of urgency and fear of redundancy in the face of the ever-changing experience of life today.

### Becoming Modernist

Although I do not intend to write yet another survey of theories of modernity, to better grasp the tangle of definitions at hand it is useful to observe how contemporary modernist studies handles them. Susan Stanford Friedman’s 2001 essay, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,” provides a useful beginning point. That a relatively coherent discipline of modernist studies exists to which this essay can address itself further demonstrates that Modernism names an object with at least pedagogical and scholarly coherence. But Friedman characterizes modernist studies as “filled with contestation over the very ground of study” (493). The essay’s central call for consensus about modernism seems at odds with Friedman’s acknowledgment that “Definitional activities are fictionalizing processes, however much they sound like rational categorization” (493). But it helpfully singles out two themes as integral to defining Modernism: revolution, on the one hand, and reason and progress, on the other. While Friedman might have called the first Modernism and the second modernity, she does not want to assign separate terms to these themes because the border between them is unclear and, in any case, they seem to depend on one another. Friedman is right on both counts. Her proposed solution is instead to define Modernism according to the gulf between these themes.