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Scott Ortolano, ed. *Popular Modernism and Its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Scott Ortolano, ed. *Popular Modernism and Its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 277 pp.

Keywords

modernism, postmodernism, popular modernism, Ortolano

Scott Ortolano, ed. *Popular Modernism and Its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 277 pp.

This collection of essays states two aims: firstly, it seeks to show the links between high modernism and its contemporary popular culture; secondly, it finds traces of modernism from its inception through today. The essays largely work under the assumption that high modernism and popular culture are considered antithetical. Therefore, the book believes strongly in its own provocativeness. While the introduction and the afterword both invoke *Downton Abbey* as a site of controversy, the majority of the texts discussed are not so polemical. Yet this does not impede the success of the chapters or disturb the integrity of the central aims.

Scott Ortolano's introduction identifies a critical shift in modernist studies at large in which scholars have begun to either a) highlight connections between popular culture and modernism or b) "validate the popular" in its own right (3). This shift greatly expands the cartography of where we should look for modernism's trademark aesthetic and ideas. Ortolano also suggests that modernism's resurgence within our contemporary popular culture may be a result of dissatisfaction with the "calcification" of postmodernist ideals (4). Popular modernism offers new ways of approaching modernism while telling us something about our own cultural moment.

Collectively, the essays in the first section of the book reveal that modernist studies have neglected to investigate certain aspects of that period. The new approach focuses on mediums other than traditional literature, thus revealing the dynamic production of popular culture undergirding the modernist era. Marsha Bryant examines the men's magazine *Gentry*, which blurs the boundaries between "minority and mass" magazines and challenges mainstream masculinity in its attention to personal style (21). Nicholas Daly, in turn, situates Welsh composer Ivor Novello's operetta *Glamorous Night* (1935) as a text that revitalizes an overfamiliar formula in popular culture to "make it new" à la high modernism. Speaking to a form that would have been brand new to modernist audiences, Adam Nemmers elucidates the popular modernist power of the radio drama. The "democratizing factors" of radio broadcasts synthesized with traditionally modernist modes and experimentation to create a concoction borne of both high and popular culture (64). Jonathan Goldman considers the figure of the celebrity during the Great Depression via the gangster film *Little Caesar* (1930). Barry J. Faulk's essay concludes the section, reading Charlie Chaplin through the lens of Walter Benjamin, positing him as "a unique artist hero figure whose mastery of his art comes from his extensive knowledge of the metropolis" (96). For the most robust discussions tying text to topic, see Nemmer and Faulk, who address not only the "popular" but also, significantly, "modernism."

Part Two accounts for the decades between the modernist period and our own time, finding traces of a modernist legacy in diverse quarters. Kirk Curnutt argues that “surf noir” literature figures the surfer as “a version of the modernist artist” who experiments with form and technique while remaining authentic and uncorrupted by the marketplace (119). Writing of a different popular genre, Paul March-Russell explores hybridity in Naomi Mitchison’s *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962)—itself indebted to Olaf Stapledon’s *Star Maker* (1937)—and the Aleutian Trilogy of Gwyneth Jones and Stephen Baxter’s Xeelee Sequence. Though hybridity is a hallmark of postmodernism, March-Russell argues that it can also be tracked through scientific romance, from early science fiction into the contemporary weird fiction of China Miéville. Asimina Ino Nikolopoulou reads an entirely different medium: Josephine Baker’s bodily performance, which she describes as oscillating “between primitivism and modernity” (153). Though past analyses have labeled Baker’s performances as regressive colonial fantasies, Nikolopoulou argues that they are self-reflexive, exploiting colonialism’s tropes in order to dismantle them. Andrew V. McFeaters’s contribution to the volume explores perhaps the opposite of primitivism—Fordism, as “the blurring of humanity with technology”—in the novels of Brian O’Nolan and Douglas Adams (168). These chapters successfully build a bridge between modernism and now, each containing a poignant nod to contemporary popular culture. Nikolopoulou’s chapter is particularly effective here, drawing a connection between Josephine Baker and Beyoncé that sets the stage for the final section of the book.

Part Three moves to the here and now. Caroline Blinder finds a modernist aesthetic embedded within *True Detective*’s natural landscape, the American sublime invoked by “references to geo-politics, the abuse of natural resources and an attendant pollution consistently marked as both psychological and ecological” (183). Reading a different television series, Walter Bosse focuses on a particular scene in *The Wire* where D’Angelo Barksdale, in prison, discusses *The Great Gatsby*. Bosse identifies parallels between *The Wire* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, particularly the Prohibition-era context of the latter, the War on Drugs in the former, and the resultant methods of social advancement utilized by characters in both. Camelia Raghinaru writes on another small screen social climber, *Mad Men*’s Don Draper, and his especially modernist masculinity, in which he “treads a fine line between repression and awareness of repression” (220). In another vein entirely, Aimee Armande Wilson compares the preoccupation with tension between “clock” time and psychological time ever-present in high modernist novels to the “linear-radial orientation of comics” (232). Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s graphic novel series *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* serves as a case study, and Wilson focuses, fittingly, on the character of Orlando. Lastly, Dustin Anderson evaluates the ethical ambiguities and memory processes present in certain video games, such as *Assassin’s Creed* (2007) and *Mass Effect* (2007). His chapter ends by raising the

possibility that, in creating new forms and variations of narrative, games are in fact enacting the purest modernist tradition. Each of these chapters do credit the idea that tenets of modernism remain alive and well in contemporary popular culture and erect solid jumping-off points for future scholarly inquiries. Here, they suggest, are promising places to seek slivers of modernism in the twenty-first century and lenses through which to read them.

Faye Hammill's afterword succinctly strings together the three sections, demonstrating a natural but unplanned continuity between modernist works, contemporary works, and those produced in times between. She emphasizes these connections because, she argues, not only does the book reveal "the myriad ways in which modernist ideas, techniques, and aesthetics are revived, re-used, invoked, or critiqued" in popular culture, but that such contemporary modernisms are dependent on "the popular appropriations" that came before (257). Notably, her genealogy concisely justifies the inclusion of each of the three sections, when any of the three could comprise a book-length argument on its own.

Largely, *Popular Modernism and Its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games* successfully highlights the echoes of modernism in contemporary popular culture. Yet, there are some questions that the project inadvertently raises. The relationship between postmodernism and popular modernism requires additional attention, for example. Moreover, the text does not address whether or not similar traces of modernism can be found in places outside of contemporary popular culture—that is to say, in more "classic" examples of literary fiction. As an early text in what may become a particular branch of modernist studies, however, this book establishes a clear precedent for further critical inquiry. These questions, having now been raised, may be answered at a later time.

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