



Call for Papers

Contemporary Modernisms

Institute of English and American Studies and the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform
Goethe University Frankfurt
25th–27th May 2023

Organised by John Greaney (Goethe University Frankfurt)

Confirmed Speakers:

John Brannigan (University College Dublin)
Julie McCormick Weng (Texas State University)
Václav Paris (City University of New York)
Barry Sheils (Durham University)
Julie Walsh (University of Essex)

For at least thirty years now, modernism has operated as a benchmark for measuring the innovative aesthetics of contemporary literary practice. In 1992, the critic Peter Bürger suggested that ‘a theory of contemporary aesthetics has the task of conceptualising a dialectical continuation of modernism’. Approximately ten years later, Marjorie Perloff, in *21st-Century Modernism*, recalled modernism’s earlier revolutionary impulses to describe the innovations of contemporary American poetry. Rebecca Walkowitz prominently transnationalised this gesture in her 2006 book, *Cosmopolitan Style*, to describe the ethico-political re-deployment of modernist techniques in contemporary fiction. In the following decade, various artists and critics continued to declare, and heighten the importance of, the relevance of modernism to the contemporary. Zadie Smith famously suggested in her 2008 essay, ‘Two paths for the Novel’, that Tom McCarthy’s avant-garde *Remainder*, as opposed to forms of lyrical realism, represented ‘an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward’. In 2010, McCarthy suggested that ‘The task for contemporary literature is to deal with the legacy of modernism’, a sentiment which Will Self and Julian Barnes echoed in 2012 and 2015 respectively. More recently, preoccupations with the legacy of modernism in contemporary culture have spilled over into mainstream journalism. Writing for *The Irish Independent* in September 2016, J. P. O’Malley describes Eimear McBride as reviving and resurrecting Irish modernism. Andrew Marr, in *The New Statesman* in April 2022, designates Ali Smith as a ‘thoroughly modern modernist, one turning the legacy of Joyce and Woolf into vital fiction for the 21st century’. And in the following month, the Australian writer Gerald Murnane was described in a career retrospective in *The New York Times* as ‘a late modernist’.

Taking account of the ongoing relevance of modernism to the 21st century, this symposium analyses the idea of a contemporary modernism. It explores the index of this new dispensation and interrogates how, and by what conceptual justification, we might define the current era of literary production as marked by a return to, or a continuation of, the aesthetic precepts of modernism. It asks: why and where do modernist innovations (still) happen in the contemporary period? Does modernism afford a means to push contemporary aesthetics forward? Is modernism the apposite/only frame through which the innovations of the contemporary can be identified? And by extension: does a nostalgia for modernism obscure the experimental strategies of contemporary cultural practice?

Similarly, as many scholars continue to apply the terms late modernism and postmodernism to 21st century literature and arts, we may ask: what distinguishes a contemporary modernism from ideas of late modernism and postmodernism? Is there an overlap between these

terms and the ideas of periodisation they contain? How do ideas of a continuous modernism interact with the logics of rupture and periodisation prevalent to recently coined terms such as metamodernism, neo modernism, post-postmodernism, remodernism and the new sincerity? How does the idea of a ‘return’ to modernism in the contemporary period relate to ideas of global modernisms produced by the uneven development of modernity? What spatio-temporal scales (global, postcolonial, western) shape our understandings of a contemporary modernism?

Moreover, if ‘modernism’ is a retrospective academic accumulation of a variety of aesthetic, critical and philosophical innovations, what is the place of its ‘sub-groups’ and related movements – aestheticism, decadence, psychoanalysis, surrealism, amongst others – in the articulation of a contemporary modernism? Authors like Siri Hustvedt, Ben Lerner, Carmen Maria Machado, Maggie Nelson, and Olga Tokarczuk have placed psychoanalytic concepts at the fore of their contemporary fictions; would we classify such endeavours as new modernist? Does the recent appearance of psychoanalysis in autotheory, feminist writing and queer writing signal a mode of contemporary modernism? Can we read aestheticism, decadence and surrealism, amongst other modernist movements, as laying the groundwork for particular genres, styles and susceptibilities that persist in and inform contemporary aesthetic practice?

The Institute of English and American Studies and the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform (<https://www.memorystudies-frankfurt.com>) is organising an international symposium on *Contemporary Modernisms* to be held at Goethe University Frankfurt from the 25th to the 27th of May 2023. As we mean to foster dialogue and debate on this focused topic, we welcome the submission of abstracts for papers (15–20 minutes in length), themed panels and roundtable discussions.

Topics for presentation and discussion include but are not limited to:

- What is a contemporary modernism? Where, how and for whom is it located? To what ends has modernism been re-purposed in contemporary literature?
- Has modernism, as Jean-Michel Rabaté suggests, become a ‘new classicism’? What narratives of modernism sustain a contemporary modernism? Is the articulation of a new modernism in the literary arts separable from the rise of the new modernist studies?
- Do fiction’s most innovative advances today occur under the banner of modernism? To what extent, as Barry Sheils asks, ‘can a writer be a modernist today without casting himself adrift upon the ecstasy of a clever citation?’ Are there forms of experimentation in contemporary literature for which modernism, or the idea of a modernist legacy, is not an apt descriptor?
- Under what theoretical rubrics can we articulate a contemporary modernism (historicist, feminist, formalist, global, neo-marxist, postcolonial, spatial, Wallersteinian)? What theories of adaptation, appropriation and reception enable the articulation of a contemporary modernism? How do the aesthetic strategies of an early-twentieth-century modernism interact with the concerns of our day (ability, class, climate, conflict, gender, inequality, race, #MeToo)?
- What is the relation of postmodernism and late modernism to ideas of contemporary modernism? Did postmodernism mark for a new literary generation, as David James suggests, ‘merely an interruption, a temporary delay in all that modernist aesthetics had still to achieve’? What is the difference between the critical work we are doing under the banner of modernist afterlives and previous work done on postmodernism and late modernism?

Abstracts

If you wish to propose a paper, panel or a roundtable tracing this cultural, literary and theoretical dialogue, please submit a 250-word abstract with a short biographical note to John Greaney at contemporarymodernisms@gmail.com by **10 March 2023**. Participation is limited to 40 delegates max. Registration fee: €50 waged / €30 students, unwaged.