

another project. This book is required reading for any student of the period. We can hope that Brooker will return to neo-1980s literature and culture, providing us with a sequel every bit as expansive, thorough, and analytical.

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**Michael Levenson.** *Modernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. 1, 320 pp. \$40.00.

In recent years, the canon of literary Modernism has significantly widened in scope, and this has occurred alongside a broadening of critical perspective. Considering that Modernism continues to expand as a field, the task of bringing together the various threads within it into a perspicuous account of the movement is formidable. Nevertheless, in his new monograph, Michael Levenson builds on over two decades of research in the field of modernist studies to produce an authoritative account of the period, and one which is a welcome addition to the array of recent criticism on Modernism.

Whereas Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* was largely concerned with literary doctrine and aesthetic concepts, in his latest monograph he does not interpret Modernism as solely concerning individuals, forms or styles, but conceives it as a 'heterogeneous episode in the history of culture' (8). For Levenson, what constitutes Modernism is related to the artists, works, audiences, publishers and patrons in equal measure. Crucially, though, whilst he takes a synthetic approach to Modernism, he does not restrict it within a false history of cohesion.

Chapter one, 'The Avant-Garde in Modernism', emphasizes the importance of subversive art from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and establishes that the rapid growth of artistic forms and movements was a form of social rebellion. Levenson also highlights how provocation came in the shape of both the 'brazen idea' and the 'scandalous word' (21), deftly illustrating these with reference to a range of brief examples, from Zola's description of the naked Nana to J.M. Synge's use of the word 'shift' in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Most importantly, Levenson sees the break in the cohesion of culture as one important way of distinguishing Modernism in this period.

The most salient section of chapter two is 'Modernism as Racism', an issue that is entirely neglected by both Peter Nicholls and Pericles Lewis in their accounts of Modernism. By contrast, Levenson maintains that it is impossible to disregard the racist elements of Modernism. In fact, Levenson stresses that racism was tied up with the very quality of modernity and modernization. Consequently, he suggests that

‘Modernism had racism coursing through its development’ (99). His assertion that the racism in *Heart of Darkness* cannot be ignored questions the vast number of forceful defences of Conrad’s novella, and brings Chinua Achebe’s well-known diatribe against the depiction of Africans in the Congo back into contention. In addition, Levenson also propounds that Stein’s ‘Melanctha’, through its racial epithets, is ‘an exemplary case of Modernism as racism’ (99).

This section is especially relevant and timely given the recent publication of *T. S. Eliot’s Letters, Volume 3*, which reveals a number of offensively nonchalant remarks Eliot made about Jews.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, even in light of this new evidence, Levenson’s bald statement that Eliot’s anti-Semitism should not be ‘explained away’ grossly oversimplifies the issue (100). The question of Eliot’s anti-Semitism has been one of the most heated debates amongst Eliot scholars and the simple designation of Eliot as an anti-Semite has been fiercely contested by both Ronald Schuchard and Craig Raine. Most importantly, Bryan Chetty has highlighted the necessity of avoiding any simple designation of Eliot as either an anti-Semite or philo-Semite and encouraged a move towards a broader consideration of Semitic discourse. Thus Levenson’s remark about Eliot needs further support to be regarded as anything other than an indiscriminate judgement, especially when entirely divorced from any consideration of the important contributions from Christopher Ricks and Anthony Julius.<sup>2</sup> However, despite this serious shortcoming, Levenson’s ‘Modernism as Racism’ is arguably the most thought-provoking section of this monograph and reveals an aspect that has often been left out of previous broad accounts of Modernism.

Chapter three, ‘The Modernist Lyric “I”: from Baudelaire to Eliot’, looks at the restoration of lyric poetry which Symbolism accomplished in the 1880s. In a similar manner to Nicholls in *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, Levenson locates the beginnings of Modernism in Symbolism. Yet despite the fact that the lineage of Modernism has previously been traced back to Symbolism, Levenson still manages to add his own important insights. Of key magnitude here is Levenson’s discussion of Arthur Symons’s seminal work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Crucially, unlike Nicholls and Lewis, who merely highlight the important influence this book had on T.S. Eliot’s early poetry, Levenson proposes that it ‘crystallizes the triadic negotiations of emergent Modernism’, namely ‘Naturalism, formalism, and Symbolism’ (124). Far from simply being an influence on Eliot, then, Levenson propounds that Symons offers ‘a glowing, accessible picture of the path of modern literature’ (125).

Chapter four is structured around Feminism and Futurism, and explores the relationship between modernist drama and public life. It concludes that the strategies used by the suffragettes were designed to make ‘resourceful use of the power of spectacle’ (170) and further establishes that the modernists in turn adopted similar tactics, realizing that the ‘event’ created more reaction than the text or painting in itself. In order to reinforce this point Levenson draws on the Ibsen revolution, highlighting how his plays, including *Rosmersholm*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder*, added to the image of The New Woman. These plays, Levenson points out, were as much a ‘political’ as a ‘literary’ event, as they exemplified the prolonged public dispute whilst also encouraging it (174).

Perhaps, however, the most interesting aspect of this chapter is his discussion of the Strindberg reaction. Levenson eschews the common conception that there is merely a basic contrast existing between Strindberg and Ibsen. Rather, he suggests that Strindberg tried to ‘radicalize’ Ibsen’s view on prose social drama (177). This radicalization, Levenson argues, was most apparent in Strindberg’s theatre of sex war, where ‘discussion’ turns into ‘quarrel’ and talking becomes ‘a form of violence’ (177). Levenson’s discussion of Strindberg and Ibsen is all the more significant given the glaring absence of these two key figures from otherwise useful guides to Modernism. One of the weaknesses of Nicholls’ *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, for example, is that it gives no mention of Strindberg whatsoever, whilst any reference to Ibsen is limited to little more than a fleeting glance.

In chapter five, Levenson extends his outlook on Modernism. In this chapter, entitled ‘Modernism in and out of War’, he stresses that artists began to experiment unreservedly with different artistic forms. Thus, Levenson argues that: ‘The best approach to the next phase of Modernism... is to acknowledge the rapid mobility among forms and genres and the mixed character of many significant works’ (220).

This, however, is where Levenson’s monograph on Modernism falls short. He fails to capture the complete character of Modernism by neglecting to mention in any real detail one of the artistic modes which the literary modernists most frequently aspired to: music. In fact, music was arguably the most vital and inspirational artistic mode for modernist writers. Virginia Woolf reinforced this when stating that the writing of literature was ‘nearly allied to the art of music’ (*Essays* 31), and it provided Woolf with much inspiration in experimenting with a new form for the novel: ‘It’s music I want; to stimulate and suggest’ (*Diary* 32). Similarly, music became a formal and aesthetic ideal for a number of other eminent modernists, including James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T.S.

Eliot. Yet Levenson gives no consideration to the significance of music. In fairness, Levenson himself acknowledges that ‘no account of Modernism can ever be comparative enough’ but, given the magnitude of music as an influence on the modernists, its absence here is conspicuous (252).

In previous broad accounts of Modernism the significance of cinema has received very little attention. For instance, whilst Nicholls and Lewis both elucidate in considerable detail the influence of painting (particularly impressionism) on modernist literature, they rarely mention cinema or film. Furthermore, where it is acknowledged, it is rarely used as a means to enlighten the literary modernist’s output. Levenson on the other hand embraces the recent critical concern within cinematic Modernism.<sup>3</sup> In one of the most interesting sections of *Modernism*, Levenson uses the techniques employed in cinema (particularly by the Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov) to elucidate those being used in some of the seminal literary works of the 1920s, such as *The Waste Land*.

Levenson then proceeds to explore the Great War and its effects on Modernism, from several different perspectives, including gender, the question of form and representation, Dadaism and Surrealism. He is, however, largely unsuccessful in his attempt to explore such a range of topics in a single chapter. Indeed, from the Harlem Renaissance to the American experimentation of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, this chapter comprises a series of brief snapshots which are not explored in sufficient depth to provide any fresh insights. Similarly, another major flaw of Levenson’s monograph is that his close analysis of canonical modernist texts is often perfunctory. Even taking into consideration the wide-ranging reach of this monograph, it seems inexcusable to reduce *The Good Soldier* to a single sentence and for *To the Lighthouse* to receive little more than a paragraph. This is all the more frustrating considering his proficiency in close reading, which is clearly demonstrated by his penetrating analysis of Yeats’s later lyrics.

Ultimately, this book successfully reframes Modernism so that it is not simply seen as ‘an endless pursuit of the new’ but, rather, a continual ‘discovery’ to solve the problem of modernity (267). On the whole, Levenson’s re-assessment of the period is far more subtle than some recent provocative accounts (such as Peter Gay’s *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*), and a lot of the ideas contained here will already be familiar to many. Nevertheless, Levenson’s monograph, as a reliable and conclusive history of Modernism, will prove most helpful to students and scholars alike. Although it does not provide us with a radically different account of Modernism, its clear and comprehensible insights clarify

some of the most challenging issues that Modernism raises and it will, therefore, remain a valuable guide.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, with reference to the ‘German Jew, Lion Feuchtwanger’, Eliot claims that ‘I am always prejudiced against such people’ (Eliot 816). Elsewhere, he asserts that Laura Riding’s poetry displays ‘a variety of Jewish cleverness’ (ibid 546).

<sup>2</sup> See Schuchard, Raine, Cheyette, Ricks, and Julius.

<sup>3</sup> For recent interdisciplinary investigations of literary Modernism and cinema, see McCabe, Trotter, and Shail.

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