

Christopher Butler

Modernism: A Very Short Introduction.

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The popular 'Very Short Introduction' series aims to bring accessible analysis on often difficult subjects for a broad audience. 'Short Introductions' are by no means definitive arguments; nevertheless the analyses presented encompass a wide range of debates and discussions, and hence they outline general ideas related to the subject under investigation. In this small volume on modernism, Christopher Butler brings together examples from literature, music and fine arts to kindle reader's interest in this broad and highly debated subject. Students from different fields as well as curious readers will find stimulation in this exciting constellation of examples from visual culture, texts and philosophies.

It is a demanding task to date modernism, let alone define it. At the outset, Butler delineates the scope of the volume and states that the book 'is about the ideas and the techniques that went into innovative works of art in the period from 1909 to 1939' (1). Accordingly, the book is not a discussion of modernity, which Butler defines as social and historical conditions arising from decline of religious belief, increasing dependence on science and technology, growth of the market economy, commodification, mass culture, bureaucratization of life and changing relations between sexes. In limiting the scope of the book, Butler adopts the widely-accepted definition and chronology of modernism: it the aesthetic response to the period that begins with publication of the first artistic manifesto and ends right before the Second World War. A limited scope and object are necessary for such a short introduction, yet the book manages to introduce the artworks and texts generally without over simplification and within a dynamic of social and political conditions. Butler achieves this by revealing the social and historical conditions of modernity through their influence in each of the individual works he discusses.

Even though the book professes a defined and limited scope, it brings together ideas and works of a variety of modernist artists such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Woolf, Schoenberg, Picasso, Matisse, Brecht, Dali, Breton, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, and Duchamp among others. What unites these different artists and authors under the rubric of modernism is the main theme on which Butler builds the book: 'the challenge to our understanding of individual works of art' (2). Such a theme to define modernism might be considered too general or lacking in the historical specificity required of any discussion of modernism. Yet Butler is cautious in outlining the ways in which modernist artworks differ from previous challenges to conception of arts. He reminds us that modernism is born out of the interaction of innovatory techniques and ideas and thus deviates significantly from 19th century realist modes in which a relatively unified worldview is presented through an authorial voice. Different artistic and literary theories by modernist

artists and philosophers, as well as converging themes and techniques found in the works discussed, enable the reader to picture modernism as a distinct sensibility of the period in question. In a nutshell, modernist works defamiliarize the world and only indirectly express artists' experiences and ideas.

Some of the prominent features of modernism Butler discusses includes its Europeanness, the interaction between high formalism and low popular content, stylistic variation that feeds on past art, formal discoveries and technical changes, innovatory opposition to cultural forms of the past, artistic cooperation that creates the sense of a movement, and resistance to representation. Alongside these general features of modernist work, individual and distinct artistic methods including Brecht's epic theater, Eliot and Joyce's mythical method, Joyce's epiphany, stream-of-consciousness, Surrealist automatism, Dadaist collage, and De Stijl's 'false scientism' are succinctly discussed. With such an abundance of carefully selected works, the reader is encouraged to imagine modernism through its variegated nature.

In one way or another the selected modernists works (some of which are reproduced in the book) illustrate modern fascination with science and technology reflected in the pseudo-scientific endeavors of artists and in their preoccupation with formal innovation, as well as the fluctuating relationship modernism has with tradition and politics. Butler takes a clear stance on one of the most controversial topics in discussion of modernism: the articulation of politics in modernist art. For him, challenge to social frameworks of belief that visionary high modernism provides (e.g. Eliot, Joyce, Woolf) rests on 'the very high value it placed on the integration of the individual, subjectivist view of life' (61). Butler argues that it is this significant tenet of individualism that will come under pressure from the political demands of right and left in the 1930s.

Not all readers or modernist scholars are likely to agree with Butler's thesis on politics and modernism. Butler bases his argument on the relationship of modernism and politics on conflict between individual (artist) and group (political party). He uses Lukács's initial criticism of modernism as glorifying anti-humanism and the abnormal as an example of Marxist pressure on modernist art on the one hand, and Nazism's hatred for the avant-garde as an example from the right, on the other. Butler's perspective and his selection of examples runs the risk of equating Marxism with the practices of the Soviet Communist Party. Granted that social realism (as promoted by Lukács, and the Communist Parties all around the world) became the official doctrine, and that Stalinism shares a lot with Nazism, it should also be acknowledged that Marxist debates on aesthetics are much more complex and innovative than Butler's presentation suggests. The period in question witnessed some of the most fruitful and innovative discussions on aesthetics by Marxists such as Leon Trotsky, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin—a leading figure in modern cultural criticism whom Butler does not mention—and even Lukács' views on modernism transformed over time.

The book's simplification of Marxist debates on the political function of artworks might be a result of its introductory aims and the practical limits fixed by its length. Due to its brevity and merely introductory goals, there is also an excusable absence of an extended discussion on the different concepts of individual and politics put forth by international avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism or Futurism (which are treated as modernist movements in the book) and their interaction with high modernism. A further discussion of the debates resulting from avant-garde involvement in politics might have expanded the issue of modernist politics. To his credit, however, Butler discusses the importance of collective formation and artistic cooperation during the period in question, while pointing out that the avant-garde movement might present a distinct tradition within modernism itself.

This book has its shortcomings, which are due, as one would expect with any introductory effort, both to certain necessary exclusions, and to the simplification of debates surrounding modernism, avant-garde and politics that may bother readers more versed in the subject. Despite such shortcomings, however, *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction* succeeds in bringing together a variety of works, artists, texts, and theories and presenting a very complicated subject to a wide audience. Readers will likely gain substantial insight and be motivated to investigate modernism in depth. Butler opts for a pluralist, non-linear, non-ideologically driven conception of modernism, and argues that 'the idea of elitist or movement driven progress may have misled many at the time, because we can now look at the period as a whole and see that, in fact, an eclectic pluralism and dialogue was dominant' (93). His short introduction to the subject reflects precisely this understanding of modernism, providing an eclectic set of examples, ideas, and questions that can provoke further inquiry.

Irmak Ertuna-Howison