

BOOK REVIEWS

Outsiders' Modernism or Outside Modernism

Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form. By Judith Brown. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. 216 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic. By Elizabeth Outka. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 232 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

For the past several years, literary critics have traversed a Ponte Vecchio over the heralded “great divide,” the mythologized distance between modernism and mass culture defined by Andreas Huyssen. The bridge over the great divide is old and heavily trafficked, recent studies remind us by catching modernist writers in the act of crossing it, but this bridge is also ever available for renovation, reshaping, and reimagining from new critical perspectives. The concept of the “great divide” remains a landmark of literary modernism, the Arno (perhaps better the Adorno?) that helps to shape the city around it, but modern authors are merchants on the bridge, their literary stalls abutting equally influential markets (department stores, radios, periodicals, advertisements, the cinema, etc.). Scholars revealed the participation of the modernist writer in that noisy world of commerce and mass media—Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* leading the way—and now in the current wave of critical work on literature and modernity, we see a fascination with and acceptance of liminality, a view from the bridge, as it were. Judith Brown’s *Glamour in Six Dimensions* and Elizabeth Outka’s *Consuming Traditions* show how dazzling this view can be.

Both Brown and Outka combine a wide-ranging approach to the cultural landscape of modernity with innovative readings of the modernist texts that are monuments in that landscape. They thus reveal the interdependence and richness of the pairing of cultural studies and modernist literary studies. These two books also demonstrate how radically different such readings can be in both style and trajectory. Outka relies on the startling clarity of her insights. After absorbing the logical force of her arguments, her reader feels that of course the paradox she articulates provides the answer to certain recursive debates in modernist studies about the form and politics

of nostalgia. Her work as a cultural historian and close reader persuades and entertains because of its strong organization, evidentiary detail, and stylistic precision. Brown, by contrast, relies on the artistic movement of the critic's mind, the associative capacity of theory and close reading to bring together unexpected couplings with lucidity and loveliness. While Outka convinces her reader that these artifacts (like *Major Barbara* and planned industry towns) must be considered together, Brown makes that reader grateful that unexpected pairings (like Wallace Stevens and Chanel No. 5) were considered together.

Both books champion paradox as a key to understanding modernity and modern fiction. Long considered a distinguishing characteristic of literary modernism, paradox provides a fertile focus for critical inquiry that addresses the contradictory desires and fascinations of modern culture. In *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, Brown situates glamour in both the modernist fetishization of literary form and the mass cultural fetishization of product and celebrity—indeed, she intermingles them in her analysis of their shared vision of modernity. While glamour tantalizes the senses and promises intimacy, it screens itself from view with alluring blankness, incorporating mechanicalism, inorganicism, and technology into its allure. As Brown writes, glamour possesses the “magical ability to shape and reshape the objects before us, to make them better, more tantalizing, by pressing them into an inhuman dimension” (9). Modernist experimentalism shares this desire to reshape and render sublime. Thus, in Brown's account, both T. S. Eliot and Greta Garbo typify this longing for impersonality and the transcendence it promises, what Brown calls “an impossible desire” (103). Glamour promises to transform and preserve time as well as people and objects; Brown writes that the aesthetics of glamour betray the desire that “the past [could be] improved on, even enchanted, through the static and technologized frame” (11).

This longing to infuse the present with the past (and the past with the technologized promise of the modern) also serves as the subject of Outka's study. In *Consuming Traditions*, Outka argues that in British literary modernism and the culture at large, a nostalgia for the genuine article, free of commercial taint and imbedded in a comforting past, fueled a desire for the manufactured and hence superior modern product. At this intersection of desires emerged the commodified authentic: the new “old” English country house, fixed up with modern conveniences and offered on the market, the elegant department store, masking its commercial qualities with domestic decoration and touristic experience. In Outka's persuasive account, the fixing up and the masking, far from disguising the commercial origins of the authentic, define the appeal of the commodified authentic; it promised the modern subject convenience and agency while preserving the aura of the old. The products and places thus packaged had a “noncommercial aura [that]

made them appealing; their underlying commercial availability promised to make the simulation better than the original, for these new hybrids were accessible, controllable, and—in their ability to unite seemingly antithetical desires—tantalizingly modern” (4). This contradiction, the pairing of “an elegiac longing for permanence or an enduring originality” with “an innovative self-fashioning” links modernist literature and commercial rhetoric from the period (5); both attempt to strike a compromise between nostalgia and modern reinvention. Embracing paradox, Brown and Outka both see the experience of modernity marked by the subject’s ironic awareness of contradictory desires, which modernist writers attempt to reflect if not to solve.

Brown’s close readings are luminous—appropriately enough, since she often considers the relationship between glamour and light. While her conceptual range and argumentative breadth are delightfully, even dizzyingly acrobatic, her prose is clean, clear, and evocative. In her chapter on Wallace Stevens, Brown establishes the allure of the otherworldly, the cold, the sterile and the sensual in his minimalist verse and in the deliberately non-representational scent of Chanel No. 5. In her chapter on *The Great Gatsby* and glamour, Brown brings together vivid opposites as she deals with “the lyricism that exists alongside the novel’s violence, and conveys the intense desire of its narrative voice” (46). Her meditations on desire and memory throughout the book are nuanced and keen. Brown alludes to Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida without ever being swamped by them; she shows her theoretical chops but always in the interest of her own distinct formal analysis. Her chapter on cellophane is a stylistic and theoretical *tour-de-force* and includes fabulous illustrations of glamour girls swathed in sheaths of plastic. While each chapter relates to the overall concept of glamour, Brown shows impressive versatility in the topics she tackles and in the strategies with which she tackles them. At times, glamour becomes so protean as to be not just paradoxical but precariously capacious. To ask that the critic restrict her range, however, would be to impose pedestrianism on a work that deliberately trips the light fantastic with its subject matter; this glamour is “in six dimensions,” after all.

Outka, on the other hand, situates us squarely in a place and time, in England during the dawning years of literary modernism, and she explains that she chose this transitional moment both for its unique commercial innovations and for early examples of anxieties and contradictions that become full-blown in later modernist works. Thus, she is interested in works like Forster’s *Howards End* and Woolf’s *Night and Day* that seem to dangle perilously between the traditionalism of Victorian prose and the experimentalism of the modernist psychological focus. By making opposed desires and even opposed aesthetic or narrative effects the center of her analysis rather than the challenge it has to conquer, Outka arrives at

new and subtle readings of critical cruxes that seem to demand the critic's moralizing assessment. She refuses this demand and instead recognizes ambivalence, incompleteness, and the authors' uneasy recognition of modern life's untenable bargains. Thus, Outka productively explores the uncomfortable politics of real estate and desire in both George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* and E. M. Forster's *Howards End* as cultural symptoms rather than ideological failings, escaping conceptual snares that have frustrated other critics. Her chapters focusing on Cadbury's industry village, Bournville, and Selfridge's department store provide fruitful contextual material for tracing the potency of the new and the nostalgic (or the nostalgic marketed as new) in the modern moment.

Outka explicitly acknowledges a spatial focus in her organization, suggesting that "the commodified authentic was a cultural and material stage on which various models of authenticity were constructed and performed" (17), but I would have liked to see more theoretical exploration of space in her book's introduction. Outka traces the "commodified authentic" through a series of places: a planned community, a country house, a room with a relic display, a shop window; I kept wondering what would happen if an object that represented the "commodified authentic" was removed from its proper setting or wrested from its moorings (à la Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*), especially since melancholy and loss seem to undergird the recuperative gesture of commodifying authenticity. Suggestively, space becomes the medium for playing out the individual's desired relationship to time, as Outka explains: "Nostalgic authenticity allowed an enticing manipulation of time—fracturing it, disrupting it, expanding it, condensing it. A sense of time's passage might be inscribed onto objects or architectural details, suggesting a range of past moments simultaneously available in the present for a given consumer or reader" (9). Outka handles the ironic intersections of time and space beautifully in her close readings, as in her reading of Margaret Schlegel Wilcox's arrival at Howard's End when she is greeted by a constructed display of items representing her personal history, arranged to make her feel welcomed in a historical home that was not hers. The ironies of newly invented histories and newly decorated places designed to evoke the sanitized past and comfortably modern present are never lost on Outka.

Both books are stylistically lively and conceptually rich; they attest to the analytical rewards that come with the recognition that innovations in marketing, technology, personality, and media were intimately related to the literary innovations we associate with modernism. Whether glamorous or nostalgic, artificial or authentic—or, better still, as both critics indicate, some tantalizing, paradoxical combination of those seeming opposites—modernity still has the power to surprise and modernist studies to make itself new.

Works Cited

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