Reading Sideways: Middlebrow into Modernism

It is an old story that modernism and the middlebrow are incompatible—the odd couple of literary history. In recent years, with the organization of the Middlebrow Network and conferences, journal articles, and a book series devoted to the subject, it would seem that middlebrow studies has become a pivotal feature of modern literary history. The vigorous network of scholars reevaluating and developing a new middlebrow aesthetic are situating it within modern literary, cultural, and art history, and are bringing serious critical attention to many marginalized writers, artists, filmmakers, and playwrights. Scholars in middlebrow studies are also recovering and reassessing works by major artists and writers that until very recently have not been viewed as cohering with their more critically acclaimed oeuvres. Despite growing scholarly interest and publication in the field, however, there is far too little integration of middlebrow studies into theories and praxis of modernist studies, and we believe that this special issue of The Space Between makes a compelling case for, and actively participates in, this much needed integration process.

One lingering and distinguishing characteristic of the middlebrow is that it includes writing and performance that has historically been considered conservative, lacking aesthetic and ideological self-consciousness, counter-culture intellectual voices, and remaining averse to narrative experiment that might risk challenging or even alienating its audiences. Until recently, middlebrow theatre, literature, art, and film have been considered just too popular, pandering to audiences of indiscriminate tastes. Categories of cultural taste change, however, as Faye Hammill and other critics remind us, and the important task for critics attending to the complexities of culture in the first half of the twentieth century is to scrutinize the formation of literary taste. Hammill invites us to situate literary and cultural production more broadly, in the context of the “battle of the brows,” and see artists and writers in their “active role” in the construction of cultural hierarchies.

This recent outpouring of critical examinations of the middlebrow in turn allows re-examinations of modernism and shows that the terms themselves are contingent and indeterminate, and often fade into one another. Indeed John Baxendale alerts us to the high degree of mutuality in this production of opposing terms, arguing that the battle of the brows
was “fanned from one direction by the rise of modernist literature, art and music, and from the other by the explosive growth of commercial popular culture” (71). Reconsideration of the relationship between these terms then emerges as not only necessary, but as yielding new understanding of their cultural and historical origins and contexts. We learn that their cultural circumstances produced the terms and that the dichotomy represents only a partial view of modern literary production and continuity.

While high modernism defined itself to a large extent as being in opposition to pleasures afforded by middlebrow cultural texts and objects, the essays in this collection show that characteristics such as mass appeal or compelling narration can coexist with artistic quality and cultural value. For instance, Margaret Stetz’s essay on Rebecca West’s short story, “Sideways,” a collaboration with the popular Saturday Evening Post, foregrounds the productive potential of an unlikely modernist-middlebrow pairing. Stetz demonstrates that West successfully “used an American middlebrow weekly to explore a new kind of feminist protagonist” (61) while at the same time appreciating the much needed financial benefits of publishing her work in a high profile, mass distribution periodical. For Stetz, West’s somewhat manipulative methods yield positive results, since the publication of “Sideways” marked a turning point for the modernist writer’s “notions of feminism and of women’s relationship with power” (71). As a metaphor for the relation of middlebrow production and taste to a dominant modernist aesthetic, “Sideways” describes the directions taken up by the contributors to this issue, all of whom find new paths through or within the rigid oppositions and vertical hierarchies presumed to organize middlebrow and modernist relations in the battle of the brows.

Mia Spiro, reading two interwar incarnations of the Jewish legend of the Golem in terms of each other, finds the German Expressionist horror film Der Golem and the Yiddish play Der Goylem to be compelling cultural productions that “investigate ideas of Jewish subjectivity and identity” between the wars (11). Spiro’s analysis bridges gaps between distinct disciplines such as film, theater, and Jewish studies, as well as demonstrating that middlebrow and modernism need not be mutually exclusive. Both adaptations of the Golem legend were experimental and innovative as well as popular and financially successful; the way they “straddled the aesthetic expectations of ‘high’ art while still appealing to a wider populace indicates how folk culture could be ‘elevated’ through modernist techniques, yet still fulfill a democratic goal of reaching a broad audience through recognizable moral themes and symbols” (12).

For Michael Williamson, examining modernist Yiddish culture through a middlebrow framework yields richer, more inclusive, and comprehensive insights into literary historical relationships between Yiddish representations of modernity, the middlebrow, and modernism. William-
son’s work both recovers a critically neglected participant in the shaping of Yiddish culture, Yehoash, and shows how the inclusion of his East European poetry reconfigures twentieth-century literary history. In doing so the poet mounted a middlebrow challenge to scholars who have privileged “traditions based on loss, exile, rupture, and destruction” over Yehoash’s understanding of Jewish culture as “playful, expansive, irreverent” and of Jewish identity “as multiple, irreducible, and contiguous” (38).

Noël Coward is rarely associated with modernism; however Rebecca Cameron’s account of the reception of his 1931 revue Cavalcade in the context of the battle of the brows raging in the British media reminds us that key literary figures were not always confined to one definitive label. While the play contains moments that could be read as overly patriotic and reactionary, Cameron suggests that Coward’s nuanced and ambivalent stance toward war did not align with the wave of recent anti-war works of disillusionment, and was easily overlooked by critics, often moved and influenced by “the presence of a live audience” with observable responses (78).

Victoria Stewart’s essay turns to questions about modernism’s boundaries with another suspect genre, detective fiction, typically dismissed as popular and formally unsophisticated. Stewart reminds us that during the interwar period, detective fiction’s key British practitioners, Dorothy Sayers and Nicholas Blake (known in other, higher art circles as Cecil Day-Lewis), contributed to contentious debates defining the genre. These debates (which also involved T. S. Eliot, an avid fan of detective fiction) were conducted through reviews and essays but also within the novels themselves, thus adding complexity to the genre’s basic premises with “narrative self-referentiality” (114) highlighting the genre’s resistance to the “proliferation of generic rules” in this crucial period of its development (103).

Taking us from British to American culture, from genre fiction to art history, Mona Hadler extends the blurring of boundaries between modernism and the middlebrow through analysis of an overlooked chapter in Surrealism’s relationship with mass culture—its love affair with boxing in the 1920s and 1930s. Hadler argues that the boxer, life-long boxing aficionado, and Surrealist painter William Baziotes’s complicated fascination with the famous Senegalese boxer Battling Siki, points to tensions in the relation between Baziotes’s and the Surrealists’ appropriation of the boxer as a fitting trope for artistic practice in interwar America. These tensions were produced by a society fiercely divided over the meanings of race, class, and gender, and they remained central to the conflict over the values of mass vs. avant-garde cultural expression well into the 1940s. Hadler suggests that reexamining relations between avant-garde and boxer “kitsch” through study of the career of William Baziotes leads to new knowledge about the origins of Abstract Expressionism, its ties to mass culture, and ways we might rethink its authority to define high art values and practice
in the twentieth century.

As our contributors demonstrate, the historical problem of aligning literary periods and aesthetic categories with the changing interests and responses of individual artists, writers, and adapters results in marginalizing those works that are compelling precisely because they defy the labels of literary fashion. The texts, images, techniques, and communities studied in this special issue destabilize any characterizations of high, new, or late modernism, postmodernism, realism, Abstract Expressionism, or Surrealism. Most crucially, these works and the scholars who study them unsettle general assumptions about the middlebrow, blur boundaries with modernism, and successfully move our interdisciplinary field beyond the battle of the brows.

Phyllis Lassner
Northwestern University

Ann Rea
University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown

Geneviève Brassard
University of Portland

Notes
1. These critics include Erica Brown and Mary Grover, Nicola Humble, John Baxendale, and others.

Works Cited