

Modernism and the City

INTRODUCTION

The articles in this section had their origin in a workshop on 'Modernism and the City' held at The University of Sydney in July 2005 under the auspices of the School of Languages and Cultures. Some researchers within the School had already collaborated on a project comparing the figure of the *flâneur* in a number of modernist literatures, and this orientation is reflected in several of the articles published here. More generally, it was apparent that the School, with its wide range of language and cultural studies departments, including Asian, Middle Eastern and European, brought together a group of researchers who could offer valuable insights into the diverse trajectories to modernism; thus the aim to develop a comparative approach to these themes gave rise to the workshop 'Modernism and the City', to explore how authors from different societies and cultural backgrounds relate to the modern city, each with its own particular trajectory into the present.

According to Malcolm Bradbury,

the literature of experimental Modernism which emerged in the last years of the nineteenth century... was an art of cities, especially of the polyglot cities which, for various historical reasons, had acquired high activity and great reputation as centres of intellectual and cultural exchange.¹

He lists amongst others Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Moscow and St Petersburg, London, Zurich and New York. While on the one hand often established cultural capitals, they also contained within them all the tensions produced by the novel environment of modern metropolitan life, they concentrated the forces of change sweeping through the world, were a ferment of cultural friction, indeed of "cultural chaos",² the foci of the dissolution of old ties and identities; centres of migration they drew together men of widely contrasting situations and conditions. Impossible to pin down or convey in traditional forms, the modern city seemed to demand a revolution in artistic sensibility and aesthetic expression.

What is it about the city that provokes this crisis in representation? What are the qualities of the modern city that disrupt the production of art, which send artists searching for new means of expression? For David Harvey³ these features can be found in the speeding up of time and the compression of space that are characteristic of the modern city.

Along the dimension of space, we might mention the increasingly complex interaction that results from the juxtaposition of different communities, whether class, ethnic, or religious-based, whose paths intersect onto the crowded city streets. And the changing subdivisions and boundaries of the modern city, as new populations are brought within its limits, as quarters are transformed so rapidly that the ground 'changes beneath the feet' of the inhabitants. Thus geographical and social mobility (including social exclusion) can occur even as the inhabitants stay put, so that they may no longer feel 'at home', even though they have not moved.

Along the other dimension, that of time, let us note the rapidity and the expectation of change that inevitably transform the conception of past, present and future. The relationship of city to countryside is not only a spatial relationship but even more one through time: the return to the country by the writer is also a journey back to the past; Culture and Nature seem to belong to different time-scales rather than to co-exist in the same world. And yet they are linked in space by the technological innovations: the railways, the Post Office and the telegraph wires, the cinema and photography that transform the rhythms of daily life and the nature of social interaction. Technological innovations compress space and time. They serve as sources of metaphor and metonymy to represent the subjective experience of modernity.

The modern city thus installs flux at the heart of life and into this vortex it precipitates the artist, fascinated and appalled by its promise and its danger. Hence the fundamental ambivalence of the artists' attitudes towards the city: on the one hand, it may be seen as liberating and inspirational, vibrant with movement, colour and image, a rich source of metaphor and narrative. One significant theme of modernist literature is that of artistic emancipation in and through the city: the journey of discovery and self-discovery that ends "on the edge of some urban redefinition of themselves—as if the quest for self and art alike can only be carried out in the glare and existential exposure of the city".⁴ On the other hand, the predominant experience may be that of disconnection, detachment, even alienation from all local and particular

ties, perhaps tinged with nostalgia for the community that has been lost. And looming over all, the imposed intimacy and proximity of the ever-present crowd which, with its trivial tastes, threatens to engulf the unique artistic consciousness. We do not have to share John Carey's radical critique of modernist writers' dehumanisation of the masses⁵ to recognise in modernist literature the fear and resentment towards the crowd that can turn to contempt and hatred.

The modernist writer's relationship to the city is encapsulated in a series of dilemmas:

- The problematic relationship of the artist to society, because of the change from the traditional communities (*Gemeinschaft*) whose nature and limits were continually reinforced and defined by direct daily interaction and strong collective consciousness, to the large anonymous rationalised frameworks of communities (*Gesellschaft*), where contact is mediated and collective consciousness fragmented, where the writer's place in society is ill-defined, his rôle ambiguous.
- The relationship of the artist to the public: the artist sees his role as that of the mediator of new meanings and forms, as the interpreter of social and cultural change, but what public can he hope to address? To represent something as large and amorphous as the modern city, undergoing continuous rapid transformation, requires conscious innovation in form, theme and genres, experimentation which threatens to leave the general public at a loss. How is the writer to compete with the siren call of the mass media with their offer of easy enjoyment and strong sensations?
- The relationship of the writers to their cultural roots: should they try to preserve, adapt or renounce their cultural heritage? Can non-European artists borrow from Western modernism while still interpreting a specifically local experience? What features of the path to modernity are common to all modern cities? Are they shared by the imperial city and the colonised city?

Many of these dilemmas are explored in the writings discussed in the following articles. Their interest lies not only in the discussion of the work of each writer, but in the cross-cultural comparison of perspectives that the juxtaposition of these articles allows. Several of the articles, for example, use as their starting point the figure of the *flâneur*, first identified in nineteenth-century Paris. While arguing in each case the significance of the *flâneur's* stance in the articulation of the relationship of the poet to the modern city, they show that each writer

adapts the figure to their particular historical experience and literary traditions. Thus Yiyan Wang explores the adventure of the *flâneur* in Shanghai through a close reading of a short story by the Chinese modernist writer Shi Zhecun (1905-2003). She demonstrates how both modern and traditional elements shaped and conditioned the formation of the poet's subjectivity and his representation of the figure of the *flâneur*.

Yasuko Claremont introduces two Japanese poets, Hagiwara Sakutarô and Nagai Kafû, and their poetic representation of Tokyo in the 1920s, when the city had recently been resurrected from disastrous earthquakes and transformed into a modern city. She too uses the figure of the *flâneur* as the reference point which enables her to identify the similarities and differences in their relationship to the city.

Anthony Dracopoulos discusses the Greek poet Cavafy's response to the fragmentation caused by the urban experience. For Cavafy, argues Dracopoulos, city space is empty space. It functions only as the screen onto which the individual projects aspects of his life. It is through one's involvement that these spaces are instilled with life, meaning and emotion and that inanimate spaces are transformed into spaces of one's own. The poet's rôle is thus to animate the city with these personal meanings, holding in tension the multiple ways of perceiving reality contained within the city.

Elizabeth Rechniewski explores the work of the French poet Apollinaire and illustrates how closely Apollinaire followed Baudelaire's injunction to be the 'poet of modern life': to capture the epic in the mundane. Celebrating in his poetry the machines and technology of the Belle Époque, the routines of urban life, the transformations of the Parisian cityscape, his innovations in both content and form—far more dramatic than those of the Symbolists—made him one of the most influential of French poets abroad. The dialectic of immersion in and distance from the crowd, openness to the new tinged with nostalgia for what has been lost, that characterise his writings on the city, reveal moreover the full complexity and ambiguity of the artist's engagement with modernity.

Ahmad Shboul explores the role of four major Arab poets in the movement of 'modern poetry' in the Arab East and in particular its emergence and maturity in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus during the period 1945-1965. Highlighting the themes of deracination and alienation, and the writers' indictment of political oppression, corruption and social hypocrisy, Shboul documents the multi-faceted attitudes and complex subjective responses of the poets to the Arab metropolis.

Nijmeh Hajjar discusses the Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Biography of a City: Amman in the Forties*, demonstrating how the novel innovatively attributes human characteristics to the city by drawing a historical parallel between the author's growth into maturity and the city's entry into modernity. She argues that Munif's rich experience of life in various cities and professions, and his absence from Amman for almost four decades, have sharpened his memory, enabling him to present an analytical, but affectionate and intimate, portrait of the emerging Jordanian capital, not only as an insider returning to his city, but also as a participating observer.

The final articles in this section adopt a more tangential approach to the study of modernity, seeking to highlight less well-known aspects of the formation of the modern consciousness.

Tim Fitzpatrick examines the rise of theatre performance in Italy and in London in the early modern period, focusing on the theatre's connection with respective urban living patterns. In their invention of the box office, their portrayal of city life on stage, and their open-air performance mode, which places the action on stage in continuity with the surrounding cityscape rather than quarantined from it, the *com-media dell'arte* and performance in the Elizabethan public playhouses share important characteristics. This situation changes markedly as we approach the modern period: an increasingly 'privatised' lifestyle in the city leads to an increased focus on private and personal exchanges. The stage now represents a domestic interior which, though undeniably urban, detaches itself from the surrounding cityscape. The performance space is quarantined from its urban environment, its audience insulated from external visual and aural distractions, sitting comfortably in a blacked-out and soundproof auditorium from which to view the oil-lit, gas-lit and then electric-lit stage.

Margaret Sankey's article demonstrates how, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the project of modernism played a defining role in one of the early French scientific voyages to Australia: the Baudin expedition. Focusing on the voyagers' stay at Port Jackson in November 1802, Sankey argues that the experience of the participants, as reflected in the later reporting of the voyage by Péron, are shaped by the modernist imperative, both methodologically and ideologically. The close parallels between the modernist scientific project, founded on the mastery over nature, and the colonial project, founded on the possession of lands and those who live in them, give rise to a kind of contamination of the first by the second, centred on the prize possession of Sydney. From Péron's "anthropological" point of view, the colonial

enterprise revealed itself to be a natural progression from the scientific enterprise, both modern in their focus.

Paolo Bartoloni deals with the interactive relationship between cultural memory and urban space and argues for the importance of the migratory imagination and memorisation in the constitution of modern and contemporary cityscapes. The urban design of migrant and ethnic suburbs all around the world is testimony to the urgency and necessity of erecting these essential supports for the present which, in order to fulfill their function, have to be different and yet similar to their origin; they might be called "bad translations". Examining the spatial 'translation' of Italian architecture and cultural activities in Sydney's Norton Street, Bartoloni argues that the Italian Forum, like many other migratory sites all over Australia, is evidence that memory rejects 'good' translation in order to remain memory.

This last article demonstrates once again the inter-relationship of the great modern cities, with the artists as the intermediaries in the translation of the experience of modernity. As Bradbury writes of the cosmopolitanism of modernism: "one city leads to another in the distinctive aesthetic voyage into the metamorphosis of form".⁶ The articles in this section take the reader on a voyage of discovery, in the course of which the perspective of distance may actually reveal some familiar themes.

—Elizabeth Rechniewski, October 2005

NOTES

The Workshop at which these articles originated was organised by Yasuko Claremont, Elizabeth Rechniewski and Yiyan Wang, who are also the joint editors of this section.

1. Malcolm Bradbury, "The Cities of Modernism", in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds), *Modernism 1890-1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 96.
2. Bradbury, "Cities of Modernism", p. 98.
3. David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), Chapter 1.
4. Bradbury, "Cities of Modernism", p. 101.
5. John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses, Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intellectuals, 1880-1939*, (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992).
6. Bradbury, "Cities of Modernism", p. 101.