

LITERARY CRITICISM

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ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA  
OF MODERNISM  
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Yokomitsu Riichi (1930s)

# The Dada of encyclopedias

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Does Modernism need an encyclopedia? Or, to put it another way, does Modernism need an encyclopedia when the market is already awash with so many handbooks, guidebooks, companions, introductions, glossaries, dictionaries and histories? It's difficult to say for sure, since they all claim to provide a different spin. But even a cursory glance at what's been hitting the shelves in the past year reveals that Modernism still sells, and the diffusion of easily digested research tools, many of them

with hefty subscription fees to be picked up by libraries, is part of a publishing strategy that some of the major academic presses have come to rely on. The hard-cover monograph isn't dead, of course. It's just a rare species in an increasingly online scholarly ecosystem filled with born-digital encyclopedias promising depth, breadth, reliability and renewability.

Routledge's new online-only *Encyclopedia of Modernism (REM)*, which is designed to expand over time, is advertised as the most comprehensive resource on Modernism, and includes nineteen geographic or cultural regions, 1,000 entries (by 1,500 contributors), and 100 images (a low number, considering the number of entries). The Eurocentric Modernism of a previous generation has quite rightly been under attack for long enough to warrant the creation of a much revised and wide-ranging account that includes Africa, Asia, Australia/Oceania, Canada/the United States, Latin America and the Middle East/Arab World. And by keeping the word "global" out of the title, Routledge seems to be suggesting that Modernism

is and always has been bigger and broader than critics have made it seem.

You can navigate *REM* by searching for keywords or, if you have some time on your hands, you can browse by subject (Architecture, Dance etc), place, or movement (Abstract Expressionism, Bauhaus etc). Routledge have included video interviews with some of the authors and provide a tour for those who still might not know how to do an online search; and it's all accompanied by a soundtrack more reminiscent of *Downton Abbey* than an atonal piece by, say, Arnold Schoenberg. And since making encyclopedia-goers feel comfortable is clearly part of the game plan, this tour also includes a simulated search for “Virginia Woolf”, followed by an accelerated run through the entry under her name. It culminates in a cross-referenced detour to feminism and suffragism that is accompanied by the soft trilling of piano keys.

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“Virginia Woolf” is not just any keyword, of course: her name is synonymous with English-language Modernism. But considering the global scope of this project, wouldn't it seem more appropriate to have someone or something less canonical and perhaps not Western? Why not, for instance, “Young Kuk-Yoo” (a pioneer in Korean abstract art, who created the “Neo Realism school”) or the “Kiowa 5” (a group of Kiowa-born artists in Native American territory, now Oklahoma, known for their auto-ethnographic paintings)? If we are to be guided by the entries compiled here, Modernism is a term that refers as much to the Cancan and the Modern Belly Dance as it does to Dada and James Joyce. Not knowing much more about the Cancan

than the signature leg-kick, I soon discovered it was a “form of dance that emerged in the early twentieth century, echoing the development of modern mass culture”; and I was informed that Frida Kahlo’s work is “emblematic of a Mexican national and indigenous tradition, and as a depiction of female experience”. Belly dancing seems a less convincing presence here, even if it had “an uneasy and anxious passage through modernity”. Considering that all of the entries in *REM* deal with subjects and movements from the twentieth century, the offhand reference to “modernity” is not always enough to explain why someone or something is Modernist.

In “Modernism in Africa”, we are reminded, in fact, that *modernus* (“just now”) is related etymologically to the concept of time, but modernity does not have a unified timeline. That’s partly what makes a subject such as African Modernism different from an earlier Western version. It doesn’t happen in literature and the arts between 1890 and 1940; it doesn’t involve a break with an entrenched bourgeois tradition; and it is not

responding to economic, social or political pressures similar to those faced in the West. Modernism in Africa is fundamentally different because of decolonization movements in the 1950s and 60s, which subsequently inspired artistic experiments in different regions and newly independent nations, some of them embracing languages and forms inherited from European imperialism (as in the case of the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo), and others rejecting them outright in favour of indigenous traditions, languages and genres (as in the case of the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o). Knowing this about Modernism in Africa, of course, makes you wonder whether the term Modernism itself is even applicable any more, especially in the light of the fact that there are so many alternative modernities out there with examples that simply don't fit the established definitions and narratives that have been in place for decades.

Modernism isn't the only field to go global in recent years. But it's striking how long it has taken critics to embrace its intrinsic globalism, which has

been reinforced as much by the extensive cross-cultural diffusion enabled by empire, decolonization and diaspora as it has by advances in transport and communications technologies. The problem with global Modernism, however, is that no one seems quite sure how to do it. Once upon a time, a more global approach to Modernism was the provenance of specialized, multi-linguistic comparatists, many of them housed in area studies or language departments. But increasingly, it is the responsibility of anyone working on Modernist literature and art regardless of which corner of the world they choose to inhabit. For some, of course, the global turn is part of a more insidious shift in an increasingly politically correct academy, but for others it is an opportunity to rethink the entire design of the field, and in doing so figure out how much about Modernism and the world remains unknown.

An encyclopedia such as this one is part of a consolidation phase that involves searching out and reassembling material that often falls under the radar. If you are not already familiar with South

America, for instance, it is unlikely you will know that *modernismo* is a term that refers both to modern art and to literature produced in Spanish-speaking countries on this continent between 1880 and 1920 and, more specifically, to the modern art and literature produced in Brazil between 1922 and 1945. The same is true for Modernism in Asia. If you were raised on Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, you might be surprised to discover that there was such a thing as Tibetan Modernism and that there was a group of Bengali Modernists, involved with a little magazine called *Kallol*, who reacted against the internationalism of the Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore not long after Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats sang his praises.

And what about Modernism in places such as Turkey, Iran or Japan? The year 1922, a holy date in the history of Western European Modernism if there ever was one, also corresponds with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, marking the founding of modern Turkey and the moment when the Persian poet Nima Yooshij began writing what was later



called *sher-e-no*, or the “new poetry”, in which the depth of thought dictated the rhythm of the line more than the metre (sound familiar?). A year later in Japan, the Great Kantò Earthquake brought unimaginable destruction to the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama (with an estimated 140,000 deaths), and gave rise to disillusioned avant-garde movements that imported techniques and styles already made available by the German Expressionists, Dada and the Russian and Italian Futurists. *Shinkankaku-ha*, the New Sensationalist School, was among them, a group of energetic writers who mixed interior monologue with vivid, sometimes jarring, sense impressions to capture the subjective experience of the external world.

It is this discovery of the “new” that makes *REM* such a valuable scholarly resource for so many of us. But even if the categories in this encyclopedia are intended to make the unwieldiness of global Modernism more manageable, the entries included or omitted can seem haphazard at times. It makes sense to put Dada under the section for “Movements”, even if “Surrealism”,

“Constructivism” and “Russian Futurism” are conspicuously absent (presumably because they are slated for later entries), but then to include the names of Mina Loy, Nancy Cunard and William Burroughs under that heading makes about as much sense as, well, Dada. Futurism, which is not subjected to any form of differentiation between the Russian and Italian versions, has Vorticism thrown in too, which seems reasonable, but why Marcel Duchamp, the Surrealist-sympathizer and party of one? Social Realism has an entry for Cambodian Modernism, Sherwood Anderson and Dennis Brutus, but strangely enough Bertolt Brecht, who defined realism as “wide and political, sovereign over all conventions” and charged György Lukács with being “remote from reality” is nowhere to be found. And how is it possible that a section on Montage (under Movements) does not have a separate entry for Sergei Eisenstein or John Heartfield, two of the pioneering artists who helped transform this technique into a politically loaded art form?

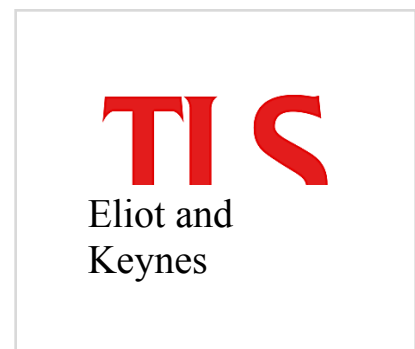
*REM's* effort to provide a global perspective on

Modernism for a general audience is certainly commendable. It also provides a cautionary tale about what can happen when a resource such as an online encyclopedia is used as a means of delineating a field. There is room, it seems, for everyone and everything, but this expansion needs to be better supported by some kind of critical apparatus that can explain how it all fits together (including the places where it does not). If Modernism is everywhere and if it “happens” across the entire twentieth century, then what exactly is it? If the history of Modernism has taught us anything in the past seventy-five years, it is that our own perspective is not timeless, and assuming that an encyclopedia-in-progress will stand the test of time simply because more entries can be added is misguided.

An online platform is no doubt a good choice for a project with global ambitions. But it would make sense to update the form of the encyclopedia itself so that it can benefit from all the technological resources available, to enable collaborative forms of knowledge production and distribution. The

online encyclopedia sponsored by academic presses and paid for by libraries is not going to disappear any time soon – subscriptions to *REM* range between £1,655 to £2,580 for individual users and £2,155 to £3,265 for institutions; academic publishers have to make money like everyone else – but it could still learn a thing or two from open-access, crowd-sourced projects which build on the collective knowledge of a globally distributed network of scholars working in dozens of different languages. This global babble, in fact, seems true to Modernism, which we learn from *REM* is less about a unified style, a culture, or even a time frame than it is about a spirit that has the power to transcend any single place and, now it seems, every single screen.

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