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CONSTELLATING A WORK OF ABUNDANCE

Sofie Behluli

A Political Economy of Modernism: Literature, Post-Classical Economics, and the Lower Middle-Class by Ronald Schleifer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 339 pp. Hardcover £75.00.

In his seminal essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), Walter Benjamin argues that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century changes in the artistic process of production and *re*-production have not only altered the ontological basis of art—by threatening its so-called “aura” in particular—but also the aesthetic experience of art itself. Processes of modernization around the turn of the twentieth century, in other words, have permanently changed the way humans produce, distribute, *and* consume art. In the two sections that bracket this essay, Benjamin politicizes his argument by embedding it in the context of fascism and presents the larger socio-political implications of modernization.¹

More than 80 years later, Ronald Schleifer follows in Benjamin’s footsteps by articulating an equally ambitious constellation of the institutional history of modernism, the changing sensual and aesthetic experience, and the social organization of the time in his latest book, *A Political Economy of Modernism* (2018). This comparison to Walter Benjamin seems appropriate as the author begins his impressive study with a methodological chapter in which he elaborates on Benjamin’s claim that “[i]deas are to objects as constellations are to stars” (qtd. in Schleifer, 7). The methodology derived from this notion of homologically constellated ideas,

in which the individual parts arrange themselves into a centerless whole, is mirrored by the structure of Schleifer's monograph. The complexity that results from such a nonlinear approach that puts phenomena of various sizes and from various disciplines side by side, rather than in a causal chain or hierarchy, is what makes *A Political Economy of Modernism* a challenging but ultimately satisfying analysis.

One of the harder aspects to parse is Schleifer's use of the notion of "political economy," by which he means the modernist institution and its constellation of "experience, wealth and, social life" (5). Schleifer's dense analysis of this triad encompasses more specifically the scrutiny of modernist literature and the arts and how they are connected to the Second Industrial Revolution, the transition from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism and from the dominance of life-enhancing commodities to life-sustaining commodities, which goes hand in hand with the replacement of necessity by desire, the emergence of the lower middle class, and the resulting shift in aesthetic experience. Schleifer's interdisciplinary analysis, which aims at further defining the "culture of modernism" (ix) that he also discusses in his two previous monographs *Modernism and Time* (2000)² and *Modernism and Popular Music* (2011),³ builds on Benjamin's

notion of "constellation" and William Brian Arthur's notion of "complexity" and boils down to the book's global argument that

the complex unity of the phenomenon of cultural modernism is best understood as relational, historical, and real in its feedback effects on other institutions at a particular moment in cultural history. These other institutions include *institutions* of experience, knowledge, and social relationships: the literary aesthetics, the intellectual analyses of post-classical economics, and the lower middle class of [the] title. (39)

By focusing on interrelationships rather than hierarchies, horizontally established (economic, semiotic, and cultural) value rather than vertically defined conditions, and social "habits of thought"⁴ rather than individual events, Schleifer's monograph offers a refined contribution to modernist studies at large.

In his endeavor to prove "that such complexity of arrangements also governs, in the time of modernism, that larger phenomenon, the political economy of culture" (7), Schleifer subdivides his study into seven chapters, an interlude on the relationship between semiotics and economics, and a conclusion on cosmopolitan modernism, which are

distributed into three main parts: Part I, Economics in the Context of Cultural Modernism; Part II, Intangible Assets: Modernist Economics; and Part III, Intangible Liabilities: Class and Value in the Time of Modernism. This structural trajectory from cultural modernism to modernist economics and finally to social class shows how fluidly Schleifer moves between disciplinary spheres and institutions of knowledge, experience, and social organization.

In doing so, *A Political Economy of Modernism* integrates “the system of culture” (23) in the conception of political economy and thereby fills a gap, which Schleifer has spotted for example in Arthur’s political economy. After all, says Schleifer, “[t]he problem of *formation* [of a political economy] is an aesthetic-literary problem as much as it is a historical-political one” (23). Put differently, the politico-economic restructuring primarily in the UK and the USA that resulted from the Second Industrial Revolution—commonly dated from 1870 to 1940 and primarily characterized by its shift from an entrepreneurial economy of needs to a corporate economy of desire due to abundance (166)—accomplishes that restructuring by means of homologous structures that organize aesthetic experience as well as economic production.

His main thesis, to repeat, is that “a host of new institutions, with

homologous or analogous structure, emerged in the new twentieth century, including structures organizing aesthetic experience.” (25) According to Schleifer, there are three main literary techniques in modernist discursive arts—“the privileged site of aesthetic experience” (45)—that exemplify this new way of thematic arrangement that is born out of a culture of abundance: parataxis, collage, and montage (24). These terms, he also suggests, characterize the elaborate vertical integration of corporate capitalism as it developed in the early twentieth century.

Although the sections with detailed close readings of literary texts are not as dominant in this book as readers with a particular interest in literary studies might have hoped for—two-thirds of *A Political Economy of Modernism* makes only sporadic references to literature and focuses mostly on political economy—they contribute significant new analyses to key modernist fiction and poetry. For example, his analysis of James Joyce’s employment of free indirect discourse reveals the enactment of “barely reflected upon values of the lower middle class” (237); in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—just like in Virginia Woolf’s fiction—Schleifer detects the “free-floating anxiety” (241) of the upper classes due to the threatening social mobility of the lower middle class; and in the fiction of H. G. Wells and

Theodore Dreiser, Schleifer traces the “displaced, dispersed, striving” lower-middle-class characters whose “alienation from one’s own ordinary interpersonal feelings. . . , it has been argued, contributed to the rise of twentieth-century fascism” (247). These analyses are fascinating contributions to literary scholarship, as they locate athematic modernist habits of thought within and without literature.

Indeed, the strength of this monograph is its immense scope and horizontal organization, in other words its literal breadth, as passages such as the following one reveal:

The long history of Enlightenment ideology in America and western Europe culminated in a culture of abundance in the late nineteenth century: abundances of ideas; of structures of understanding and experience; of goods beyond the necessities of life sustenance; of people organizing themselves into social and economic life within the contexts of the explosion of technologies of communication, physical movement, and ubiquitous sources of power. (31)

The term “abundance” is quite fitting here, as Schleifer’s book itself is a vessel of abundance, with its wide net of ideas, references, and

examples. Part of the difficulty of following Schleifer’s dense study is the subject-specific usage of economic terminology—for example “postclassical economics” (54), “intangible assets” (91), and “the commodification of experience” (189)—and the far-reaching, multilayered interrelations of cultural modernism that he brings to the fore within the space of only 300 pages. Although the author has gone to great lengths to explain the terminology, to structure his book in an exceptionally clear order with numerous sub-sections, and has provided his readers with an expansive index, I would recommend this monograph primarily to more advanced scholars of literary studies, political economy, and modern history.

For advanced scholars, *A Political Economy of Modernism* will be an intellectual treat that expands upon key economists (Marx, Smith, Marshall, Veblen), brings them into dialogue with renowned philosophers and semioticians (Benjamin, Jakobson, Peirce), and articulates how they relate both to the discursive arts (Dreiser, Joyce, Wells, Woolf, Stevens) and other arts (Cézanne, Picasso, Schoenberg). Just as a telescope enables us to see a stellar constellation with clarity, Ronald Schleifer’s study brings into focus the intricate arrangement of modernist artworks, critical thought, and political economy.

Sofie Behluli is a Berrow-funded doctoral candidate in English at the University of Oxford. While her thesis investigates ekphrastic representations of visual art in contemporary Anglo-American women's fiction, her other research interests include questions of originality and aura, and theories of post-postmodernism. She is the author of "Bonding in Bonden: A Post-Postmodernist Female Community in Siri Hustvedt's The Summer Without Men" (2017) and co-author of "Ekphrasis in the Digital Age" (2017).

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 217–251.
2. Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science and Culture 1880–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
3. Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
4. Schleifer borrows this term from Thorstein Veblen to denote the performativity of discourse, acts, and experience as social conventions (12).