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Modernities in the Americas: from the avant-gardes to nowadays

Fiona McMahon and Paul-Henri Giraud

Translation : Michael Hinchliffe

- 1 Revisiting today the question of modernity in literature, in the arts, in society and politics means using the plural. And choosing the plural means not restricting the scope to the multivocal, but often ambiguous, notion of *modernism*. Often enrolled to designate a cultural imagination of modernity, the term is under duress when it comes to accounting for divergent ways of apprehending the relationship to time, history and culture. “Modernity is not a movement like dada or like imagism. If literary history decides to call such and such an English or Spanish movement by the name of modernism, then the term immediately takes on a technical meaning. It becomes fixed. Only fragmentarily does it engage with modernity” (Meschonnic H., 1988, 26). The concept of modernity, with all its attendant European variations in technology, politics and the arts, bears the same marks of disparate experience in the geographic and cultural spaces of the Americas. The present issue of *IdeAs* attempts to provide some perspective on this concept in the field of the arts and literature taking as a starting point the emergence of avant-garde movements in the aftermath of World War I. What echo did cultural upendings in Europe produce in the Americas, and inversely, what are the forms of resistance illuminating cultural production in the Americas? It is, then, a question of taking a fresh look at a multiform and multilingual phenomenon in order to trace lines of force and division. What horizons does the destructive and simultaneously creative paradigm of modernity present for the various cultural areas of the Americas? It has been written of visual art that “In the name of artistic radicality or the idea of the break with the past” (...) “much individual or collective expression deemed hybrid, local, tardy or anti-modern has been pushed aside or belittled” (Grenier C., 2013: 16). In the same fashion, in literature, the prevalent model is that the past as an eternal future: “it takes the sanction of the ancient to have any chance of being modern, or of decreeing what modern is” (Casanova P., 2008: 137). Hence the systematic search of ancestors for the modern including in so-called “primitive” or indigenous worlds. To borrow and invert the classic antithesis stated by the

Argentinian writer José Domingo Sarmineto in the middle of the 19th century, the “barbaric” often appears more modern than “civilization” in as much as the temptation of folklorization is eschewed, which is exactly what stylizations of the modern applied to vernacular material are concerned to effect.

- 2 Both the manifest differences and the points of convergence between Anglophone and Hispanophone Americas —regretfully the Lusophone and Francophone domains could not be represented here— should help to highlight the specificities of each of these regions together with their internal contrasts throughout the period from the early 20th century to the present day. For not until the present day have successive modernities found not only their precise form but also their responding echo either as a result the questioning undertaken in post-colonial or de-colonial thinking or by virtue of certain prolongations in the arts, in literature and, indeed, in ethnology.

Painting, photography and dancing

- 3 The early 20th century avant-garde with its succession of “isms” actively promoted the utopia of blending the arts and bringing them into convergence. In Mexico during the period of cultural ferment following on the revolution, literature, painting, engraving, photography and calligraphy were all harnessed in the journal *Irradiador* (1923), proclaimed in its subtitle to be “an avant-garde journal internationally projecting a new aesthetic”. The cult of the new, an aggressive rejection of the old, the aesthetic valorization of the arbitrary and the fragmentary, the chaotic poetry of the modern city, argues **Isabelle Pouzet**, are the defining hallmarks of the ephemeral “stridentist” movement championed by the journal. The cover of the third issue carries a photograph by Edward Weston taken in Ohio in 1922 called *Steel*, showing a low-angle view of a row of factory chimneys. This discordant use of a raw but stylized image of US industry on the front page of *Irradiador* signals the arrival in Mexico of so-called *Straight Photography* and evinces the aspiration towards modernity entertained by Mexican artists under the impulsion of their northern neighbor. Weston’s sojourn in Mexico from 1923 to 1926 constitutes a linking between avant-gardes on either side of the Rio Grande.
- 4 The iconoclastic euphoria proper to *Irradiador*, its militant enthusiasm that might well appear ingenuous, gave way, as the institutionalization of the Mexican Revolution gained hold, to a more critical use of the medium of photography. Over and against the “mythology of modernism triumphant”, out of sync with the “nationalistic staging of visual culture” glorifying the regime produced by mural painters and sculptors in the twenties, **Erica Segre** identifies in Mexican photography, particularly that of Augustín Jiménez, “a reflexive strain tormented by the question of framing and the deep-seated power of coercion”. Her contribution highlights the “dissident aesthetic” which, by means of the interplay between shadow and vertical bars, points to the imprisonment of Mexicans in a cultural unanimism. This photographic “breach of discipline”, originally subterranean, became overt only in the fifties, in the work of Nacho López Rodrigo Moya or that of Héctor García. The portraits taken by García of the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) behind the bars of Lecumberri prison in the early sixties turn this Marxist painter into an icon. For Siqueiros, being and remaining modern meant being able to navigate between the antinomic aspects of his status as avant-garde painter, official artist and pariah by means of the interrupted *performance*

of an artistic and political “geste”. A muralist who constantly rejected the easel, he nevertheless succeeded in staying central to the mediatic “frame”, thanks precisely to the framing operated by photography. His US contemporary, Stuart Davis (1892-1964) presents a rather different case. In his work, **Kamila Benayada** sees a “redefinition of modernism” through the *Champions* series painted during the Cold War. Allowing that the construction of a work of art is centered on the relationship of the work to the world, Davis’s practice consists in complexifying this relationship by creating a dialogue with his own previous works and those of modernist predecessors while enlarging the artistic scope to include the visual environment of popular culture. The painted work’s transitivity links the pictorial gesture to the world with its multiple semiotic context. The artist’s relationship to his times, rendered visible on the canvass, underlies a deployment of pictorial invention which defies the barriers of genre and celebrates movement and exchange.

- 5 In her contribution, **Elsa Crousier** outlines the evolution of the Uruguayan art critic Marta Traba who founded the Bogotá Museum of Modern Art in 1963. Initially, Traba’s discourse was internationalist and cosmopolitan, but the sixties saw her defining Latin American art *over and against* that of the North, meaning Europe but, even more, the United States. Latin American resistance required, she argued, the rejection of the superficially modern platitudes of *Pop Art* together with a plunge into regional identity and the native American psyche. For a Latin American artist, to be modern meant being in some sense anti-modern.
- 6 Similarly, the study by **Claudie Servian** gives us to observe that modernity and the cultural decentering to which it gives rise lead to a metamorphosis of the US choreographic scene in the first half of the 20th century. In the theoretical writings of two choreographers, Martha Graham (1894-1991) and Doris Humphrey (1895-1958) studied in this issue, the quest for modernity involves a discovery of the most distant past. Fantasies of origin, together with a refusal of technological modernism lead the dance into explorations of lost archaic matter, buried in the unconscious or equated with models borrowed from native American cultures. The return towards tribal arts and primitive psyche places the *mechanism* of modernity in opposition to what is most intuitive and natural in the movements of the body. Hence modernity as far as the body is concerned has to do with all its signifying and expressive potential within a relationship of contact or communion with its environment. In this perspective, interaction with the ground is the hallmark of authentic creation while, at the same time, it brings to life the very decors of American history, as was the case in certain choreographies of the thirties. Thus the break with European academic tradition transits via the myth of the return to the source.
- 7 A similar movement can be observed in Latin America in the sixties concerning the notion of the *neo-baroque*, which is the subject of the article by **Marcos Rico Domínguez**. Hispanic American colonial art contrived a synthesis of pre-Hispanic civilizations and Spanish Catholicism. The aesthetic category of the *baroque*, invented in the late 19th century and theorized in the first half of the 20th, was laid claim to by a constellation of Cuban authors in the sixties and analyzed by Mexican writer Octavio Paz (1914-1998) as one of the foundations of Latin American modernity. Paz brought about a conjunction between the historical period designated as “modern” (that is from the 16th to the 18th centuries), the apogee of the Hispanic empire, rich with an abundance of seed material and the disconcerting proliferation of signs to be found in

the 1960s avant-garde, highlighting in the process the indigenous substratum of what appeared to be a highly Western, highly “modern” art.

Poetry and the Novel

- 8 Whereas the aesthetic dimension of American modernities traditionally involves the formal experimentation of artists and writers in the opening decades of the 20th century and their relationship with the European avant-garde, **Céline Mansanti** invites her readers to put to one side the discourses of contestation in favor of a reflection on the relationship between literary Anglo-American modernism and the so-called mainstream literature of the inter war period which is at present undergoing re-evaluation. In her article entitled “Beyond Clichés and Satire: Expatriation and Modernism in a Middlebrow Novel, *The French They are a Funny Race*, by Lyon Mearson (1931)”, Céline Mansanti poses the problem of the production context of a little-studied work in order to throw light on convergences of influence between, on the one hand, the modernist stage in Paris where expatriates live, a place of reflexive experimentation problematizing the discursive conventions of literature, and, on the other, middlebrow or middle-class culture, in which the transparency of the fictional and stylistic spheres goes hand in hand with the rules of the emergent consumer society.
- 9 In “Bill & Carlos : Les Amériques de William Carlos Williams” [Bill & Carlos: the Americas of William Carlos Williams], **Anna Aublet** sheds new light on the socio-cultural specificity of the work of the poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and on the dual linguistic and cultural identity of this US author born of a Puerto-Rican mother. Her starting point is the polemical nature of poetic modernity, after which she looks at the reconquest by poetry of the history and myths of the American continent, a reconquest which, in the case of Williams, is based on paradoxical operations of deconstruction and construction. Anna Aublet studies Williams’ revisiting of the founding myths of American history in his 1920s novels, *The Great American Novel* (1923) and *In the American Grain* (1925). His turning towards his Hispanophone roots is an aspect of an individual and collective quest for identity running through the entire American continent from north to south. Decrypting the semantic codes proper to Williams implies the corollary of a democratic, disparate vernacular born of interculturality. The horizons of novelty, which constitute an obsessive object of research for Williams, open in this way back to Spanish, both a maternal heritage and a vestige of the colonial past of the West Indies.
- 10 **Aurore Clavier’s** article ““New contours suggested by old words’: la modernité américaine au tamis de l’archéologie poétique [American modernity through the sieve of poetic archeology]” also centers on the past and the origin of North American letters. In it, she connects the 1920s poetry of Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams to a double retrospective and prospective temporality. Aurore Clavier takes the archeological mode underlying modernist invention as a poetic paradigm for a linking of the explorations, the excavations of the past to the emergence of an idiom responsive both to the dialectics of surface and depth and those between present contingency and original story. Whereas historiographically, modernity involves a redefinition of the modes in which the past of the US is rewritten, national cultural identity, argues Aurore Clavier, has equally to do with the fascination

exercised over these three poets by time in the long perspective. Hence the relation of the American continent with modernity is necessarily to be apprehended through the mirror set up by the mytho-poetic activity of its writers. The displacement brought about in relationship to fixed anchor points belongs to aesthetics but equally to politics and geography, involving north and south, east and west. This entire hemispheric approach is an attempt to envision the plurality implied in the enterprise of rewriting origin, in other words the search for a present rooted in multiple locales. With Williams especially, the historical and societal context of *In the American Grain* covers central America, the Caribbean and the Native American nations; a fact which lends credence to the hypothesis of an American modernism that can no longer be thought of as politically or culturally neutral.

- 11 As **François Hugonnier** reminds us in his article entitled “Reassessing Modernisms in the Light of Jerome Rothenberg’s Work”, the European avant-garde displaced attention towards the margins of artistic practice; in doing so it paved the way for American modernity towards heterogenous forms and cultures. Plurality emerges as one of the mainstays of a proteiform, international modernism. The work of Jerome Rothenberg (born 1931) reads as a plea for the setting of a new modernist stage which, beyond the bounds of American territory, would include a multiplicity of local and “global” sources from diverse periods. François Hugonnier underlines Rothenberg’s role as cartographer of a politically engaged, Pan-American, cosmopolitan, polyglot and iconoclastic poetics. As publisher and activist, Rothenberg carries out the unprecedented project of gauging literary modernity against autochthonous texts, often given in translation. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the pioneering volume *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania* (1968), this article salutes the relevance of anthologist’s action, bringing together poetries that are under-represented or smothered beneath the monolithic blanket of the Western canon.
- 12 Reaching the last contribution of this section, one might ask, as does **William Mohr**, how the mutations of postmodernity have helped to induce on the American continent the appearance of heterogenous communities engaged as readers, authors, publishers, printers or critics in the contemporary literary scene. In his article entitled “The West Coast as a Literary Capital: Independent Publishers as a Contumacious Canon of Underground Poetry”, Mohr charts the social and political conditions behind literary production, using his own poetic works as background setting. Taking as his starting point the theoretical model of the “communication circuit” proposed by the American historian Robert Darnton, a specialist of publishing history, he relates how the productive synergy set up by a group of poets and independent publishers in the years 1955-1985 enabled the emergence of a specific West Coast poetic canon. Their collective effort as cultural agents adumbrates a new story of (post-)modernity with cultural dissemination as its yardstick. Opening up the fixed boundaries of a poetic canon, which is what the literary community celebrated by William Mohr achieved, participates in the shiftings of thought and discourse that, then as now, and under differing modes, have given the primacy to change.

Beyond the West?

- 13 The concept of modernity cannot be properly apprehended without taking into account the articulations between the arts and socio-political reality. As Meschonnic has

pointed out, the political and territorial frontiers of the modern were defined by the West: “Modernity. The adjective ‘Western’ is superfluous. Modernity is European. And if West means Europe plus North America, modernity is Western.” (1988: 27). But at the same time, modernity is also “a field for the play of meaning” (1988: 26), hence subject to the time and the space in which all cultures have their being. The furrows opened by post-colonial thinking have done much to highlight how Western, that is European and American, codification has resulted in the constitution of a homogenous, universal template. Today, however, forms of resistance against the uniformization of epistemological models point in the direction of a concept of plural “modernity” that invites cross fertilization with extra-Western perspectives.

- 14 **Smaro Kamboureli** looks at modernity as inscribed in cultures perceived as minor in the West via the example of the representation of the Inuit culture of Igloodik, a small Nunavut community in the territories of Northern Canada. Her article, “Opera in the Arctic: Knud Rasmussen, Inside and Outside Modernity”, relates a dialogic confrontation between two different temporal perceptions. Between the account composed by the ethnographer Knud Rasmussen of his experience among the Iglulingmiut — *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (1969 [1927]) [*Du Groenland au Pacifique : deux ans d'intimité avec les tribus d'Esquimaux inconnus* (trans from Danish, 1929)] — and the reappropriation of that account and that historical moment effected in the Inuit film by Norman Cohn *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), appears the gulf between the ethnographer’s vision of a colonizing enterprise and a present-day epistemological reading of Inuit culture. For Rasmussen, the Western presence in the Canadian North at the outset of the 20th century, as evinced by his hearing opera amongst the Inuits, is a sign of “negative modernity”, a concept expressing what, in his view, amounted to a travesty of Inuit culture. In Cohn’s film, the relationship with this bygone period, stamped in the ethnographer’s discourse by a dissonance between modernity and alterity, evolves towards a new perception reconfiguring the concept of autochthonous “authenticity” and marking both the limits of the colonial regime and those of modernity in terms of identity building. In this way, enclosure within a given temporality is rejected and the film proposes a diachronic, de-partitioned reading of indigenous culture, at odds with the origin myth and the cult of the “primitive”. The encounter between Western archive and Inuit modes of cultural production throws up a living image of an experience of alterity. The historical account revisited by Inuit cinema opens on the unknown, exemplifying the transformation operated by an artefact on an experience of otherness.
- 15 Susan Friedman argues that this is how one enters the domain of “relational” (2015: 28) modernity, a model shot through with networked operations confronting alterities and radical alterations in a turmoil of temporalities. The concept of modernity in North American thinking has become wedded to the transnational paradigm as far as networks of cultural production are concerned and thus gives rise to a new cartography of the modern. The promotion of a diasporic theory of literature by the TransCanada Institute and its director Smalo Kamboureli points in this direction (*Scandalous Bodies*, 2000). Similarly, for Jahan Ramazani (2009), the debate on the emergence of a “transnational poetics” reveals the large scope of influence arising from the porosity of national frontiers ever since the multiple avant-garde period and beyond. Displacing the center towards the periphery, this new critical approach, constructed on the influence model known as *enmeshment*, introduces the echoes of

post-colonial culture into our on-going perception of the successive developments of modernity throughout the 20th century up to the present day.

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