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# WHY "MODERNISM" WILL NOT DO AS A LITERARY OR ART-HISTORICAL TERM

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# Why "Modernism" Will Not Do as a Literary or Art-Historical Term

Esteban Pujals

Literary and art history terms are notoriously problematic and their use often involves a provisional acceptance of views that one does not really find acceptable. Like the atheist tricked by language to say "Thank God", we concede, for the sake of discussion, the implications that the naming of a particular stage in literary or art history almost always involves and we suspend our disagreement with that naming, even when it interferes with the accuracy of our distinctions and definitions. So Medieval scholars are typically forced by language to characterise/conceptualise their field, the one thousand-year period in European history between the fall of Rome and the rise of printing, as a kind of mid-time, as an interruption of the supposed continuity that the term implies existed between the Antiquity of Greeks, Egyptians and Romans, and the culture that accompanied the rise of absolute monarchs in most of Europe. This is bizarre indeed, naming a huge period of history by insisting precisely on what it is not rather than suggesting what it really is or was.[1]

Generally, the naming of literary and/or art history periods follows two different lines. That is, there are two different kinds of words that we use in order to refer to the stages of European art. For the art and literature associated with remote periods or chunks that we select as units in the continuum of chronology for critical observation, we tend to use bizarre,

[1] This is the text of a talk read in a special seminar of the LIMEN Research Group at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid on 27 January 2015. The editors are grateful to Dr. Pujals for permission to reproduce his text.

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whimsical, sui generis terms like "Medieval", which is uncomfortable and problematic in the way I've suggested, or "Renaissance", which again involves a distortion of facts in its positive appraisal of the remote, against the recent past; or "Baroque", which is controversial in many ways but at least enables us to speak of something of which an abundance of examples may be found all over 17th- century Europe, and which is much preferable to "Metaphysical" and "Cavalier", for example, applied to the English poetry written in the first half of that century. These terms do not even allow us to distinguish very clearly between what they respectively refer to.

Now, for reference to relatively recent, or, we may accurately say, Modern developments in the visual arts, in literature and in music, we invariably resort to the *-ism* suffix. It is interesting to note that first in Latin and then in the modern European languages, the earliest words to use this suffix, *-ism*, always referred to heresies: Manichaeism (3rd century AD), Arianism (4th C), Pelagianism (5th C), and then, in the 16th C, the series Lutheranism, Calvinism, Arminianism, and, of course, Catholicism. So, and this is, I think, important, the words that appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to refer to the contemporary innovative works of modern art, (that is, the words using the *-ism* suffix, like "Cubism" and "Surrealism") carried with them an old semantic suggestion of that which is contrary to, or subversive of, the contemporary habitus. They referred to what is, so to speak, aesthetically heretic.

From the reference to what was heretic, terms ending in *-ism* began, from the mid-19th century, to include political notions such as Liberalism, Communism and Socialism, which were not, of course, heresies in the religious sense, but which do suggest something close to heresy in the context of the early stages in the transformation of European societies into the secular mould of the modern world. Together with Communism, Socialism and Liberalism, the group of *-isms* also began to include "Romanticism", a term that the Romantic poets and musicians themselves had never applied to their work, but which began to be identified with them rather late in the 19th century, long after they were all dead and could not protest the label. "Realism" also began to be used from the mid-19th C to suggest a reaction against Romanticism, once this term had gained the status of an accepted coinage. And "Neoclassicism" also appeared around the end of the century to refer to the taste which Romanticism was seen by late 19th C scholars to have reacted against. "Mannerism" too

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began to be used a little later to refer to the Italian art of the late 16th C, which spread out to most of Europe in the years around 1600. And then, in a parallel process, we get the succession of: Impressionism (1870s-80s), Symbolism (1880s-1890s), Naturalism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism. There are many more, and one could include here terms such as Russian Cubo-Futurism, or Dutch Neo-Plasticism, or even Ezra Pound's English coinages, Imagism and Vorticism, but let me stick to the 10 *-isms* that are most often encountered internationally in general discussions of modern literature and art.

Now these 10 terms constitute a group that covers synthetically the main aesthetic innovations generated by the arts from the late 19th C to the years immediately following the First World War. Unlike "Romanticism", or "Mannerism", or "Neoclassicism", they are terms that appeared in quick succession and almost contemporarily with the movements they named; and, considered together, they show an understanding of art that is radically different from the way in which art works were conceptualised before the mid-19th C. In this new, modern understanding, the notion of the avant-garde is taken from its original context, that of military strategy, and transferred to the aesthetic realm. The notion of progress, which had dominated the conceptualization of history for the 19th century, is here adapted to the field of aesthetics to generate a radically new concept of art in which every work must re-invent the idea of art itself in order to become aesthetically relevant to its time. It is not just a matter of the artist's, or the poet's, individual worth or originality, but rather a question of each avant-garde, each *-ism*, putting forward an idea of art that philosophically dissolves or ridicules the epistemological assumptions on which all earlier art was based. And this is done always, not by an individual writer, or painter, but by a generational group of artists or writers, or, as in the case of Futurism or Surrealism, both. So each of these terms is typically applied to a short period of about a decade, or a decade and a half, the time when an aesthetic proposal was in its *emergent* phase. After that brief struggling moment, that art, or that writing, becomes, in Raymond Williams' useful characterisation, *dominant*, and then, a little while later, it becomes *residual*, as another proposal, another *-ism*, emerges as an avant-garde for the next fleeting moment in time.

Let me now turn to this non-word, Modernism, which can only be used in English and the meaning of which is very close to an empty blank. Why do I say it is a non-word? Well, the

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short answer is: "because it makes us feel as if we were referring to something while it is really hard to say what the hell it is that we're referring to when we use it". If you are at all familiar with the art and literature of the late 19th and early 20th Cc, you know that, without exception, all the 10 words in the series I have mentioned, from Impressionism to Surrealism, have a very clear reference. They all are very specific words in terms of the timespan they cover, which is always very short, as I said before, a decade, or a decade and a half, in some cases two decades. Then all of these terms are focussed on a small group of four, five, in some cases seven or eight, artists or writers. And they all refer to the specific view of art or literature that those artists or writers were putting forward at the time. If I ask you what Impressionism was about, you will surely answer by mentioning "pleinairism" and the reaction against the Academy, you will limit its existence proper to the 1870s and 1880s and you will give the names of Monet, Renoir, Pisarro, Cezanne, Berthe Morisot, and Degas. And if I ask you who the Cubist painters were, you will naturally answer that they were Picasso, Braque, Léger and Juan Gris and that the term refers to what they were painting between, say, 1908 or 1909 and 1925 or so.

Now, what is the reference of "Modernism"? To begin with, what is its chronology? This is an impossible question to address, as different authors will propose widely differing answers. In a lecture given in Sidney in 1979 Clement Greenberg, surely the most influential art critic of the 20th C, described the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as "Proto-Modernists" (*Modern and Postmodern*, William Dobell Memorial Lecture), while for most of his writing life he had been pushing American Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s and even, in the 1960s, the members of the American group of painters he himself named Post-Painterly Abstraction, as continuing the project of Modernism. Greenberg's timespan for Modernism, if we take this into account, is, therefore, close to covering some 120 years. In a similar manner, many other authors see J. M. W. Turner (who began exhibiting in the 1790s) as a pioneer of Modernism, anticipating the French Impressionists, while most British and American critics insist on stretching the meaning of Modernism to include the work of Samuel Beckett, which was composed between the 1930s and the 1970s.

Again, this shows the label "Modernism" taking in an even longer period of some 160 years for its chronological reference, which makes it impossibly similar in its timespan to the Renaissance or to Baroque. I say this because the obvious point to be made about the

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difference between the behaviour of art and literature in the *ancien régime* and in its "modern" developments is the speed at which modern changes take place. Painters and writers from the *quatrocento* to the 18th century saw their work as occurring in a context in which tradition was understood as being a lot more legitimate and stable than in the 19th and 20th centuries. No matter how good they were, no matter how original, they saw their productions in continuity with a consensus about what their discipline was, and that was the result of a time-honoured tradition, so no one thought of ignoring or confronting that tradition. In contrast to that, the typical artist working in the late 19th or in the 20th centuries will typically show a disdainful attitude towards the past and will see tradition as something he/she must oppose and change. That is the reason why we have to speak of "movements" when describing modern art, a notion that makes very little sense when applied to traditional art, and that is why the reference of terms such as Cubism, Futurism or Dadaism has to be so specific in the chronology and in the content that they convey.

I hope to have argued convincingly that "Modernism" is not an artistic or literary movement. If it were, the word would have to refer to specifics, to a specific generational group and to the specific view of art or literature which that group had proposed and which could be easily discerned and described. We have already seen that the use of the word "Modernism" points to some 100 years at least, that is, well over three generations. Who, then, were the modernists?

Now this is indeed even more of an impossible question. Let us imagine we take a sober view on the matter and consider stretching the label back to about 1800 a mad exaggeration; let us imagine we apply common sense and stick to what would seem to be the core moment in modern art, the moment when its transformed nature became spectacularly visible in the decades when most critics and scholars agree that art, literature, architecture and music suffered the most profound transformation in European history, that is, during the last 20 years of the 19th century and the first twenty years of the 20th. As I say, let us imagine this, for generally speakers of English using the word do not take this kind of trouble. Now, even if we do that, once we realize that Modernism can be applied indiscriminately to every artist, every writer, every musician and architect who was alive in those four decades, we'll soon realize that the usefulness of the term is hopelessly compromised. Didn't different artists and writers and architects and musicians living in those four decades take widely differing

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positions towards their art and towards the changes that we today find so interesting or valuable? And didn't some of them react *against* the coming influences, the new ideas, and proposals? And didn't others overreach the limits of art and intend what was not possible or even thinkable at the time, ending up in lunatic asylums? What can a word that is constantly being applied both to the novels of Henry James and to the plays and poems and prose writings of Samuel Beckett possibly mean?

What I would like to stress is that the word "Modernism", as it is commonly used, tends to make no difference between moderns of at least three generations, or between progressive and reactionary moderns, or between artists and writers who started a trend and those who followed in their wake, so applying the term to an author or to a particular painting or piece of writing would seem to mean nothing other than including that art work or poem or artist or writer in the context of an extremely vague definition of a particularly long chunk in the continuum of history, the very vaguely defined modern stage.

So, is there a difference between saying that a work of art, or a piece of writing, is "modernist" and saying that it is "modern"? In my opinion, there is absolutely none, if what we are focussing on is the reference of the word.

Up until now I have been speaking as if there was only one language that humans spoke, English; and I have been describing, or subjecting to a kind of semantic analysis, the use of the word "Modernism" in English. I have also said in passing that this word will not translate into other languages, which is a symptom of some strange phenomenon at work blocking the very possibility of using the corresponding word in other languages, like French, Italian, Spanish or German, languages in which the formal possibility of using the Latinate form, *Modernismo*, *Modernisme* or *Modernismus* would, in principle, pose no problem at all.

In relation to Spanish the problem is obvious: when the word "Modernism" began to be used in English in the 1940s, the Spanish word "Modernismo" had existed already for half a century as a genuine *-ism*, that is, to refer very precisely to the architecture and to the poetry produced in the years between 1888, the date of publication of *Azul*, and 1916, the year of the death of Rubén Darío. And who would trade an admirably accurate art term, referring to a specific moment in time, and to certain characteristic traits in both poems and buildings, as well as denoting the specific names of poets such as Darío, José Martí, Amado Nervo and

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Salvador Rueda, and architects, such as Antoni Gaudí, Josep Puig i Cadafalch, or Luis Domenech i Montaner, for an impossible concoction including as its reference the whole of modern art and literature from perhaps the mid-19th century or earlier up to the present?

So that is the reason why it will not do to use "Modernismo" in Spanish as if it were the same word as "Modernism" in English. "Modernismo", with its own Spanish reference, just happens to be a more useful, a better word, and it has existed as such for some 130 years now. But what is the trouble with the English word in the attempt to transfer it from English into French or into German? Here the problem surely has to do with the intuitive realization by authors and readers in those languages that the adjective "Modern" and the abstract noun, "Modernity", which do indeed have their corresponding forms in both German and French, already cover all the possible meanings of the English word "Modernism", but do not mislead the listener into expecting the kind of specific reference that always accompanies words ending in *–ism* when used in the modern artistic or literary context. Wikipedia shows this very clearly: you will not find a straight translation of the English entry "Modernism" in either French or German. In the case of French what you get, instead of the over 30 pages that you get in the English entry, an absurd attempt at telling you everything that happened in art and literature and architecture and music from the mid-19th C until the 1970s, is a short note telling you that "le concept anglais de *modernism* correspond au concept français de modernité"; while in the case of German, not even the language, Deutsch, appears on the left-hand side's list of languages in which you can find translations of the Wiki you are reading.

Now there must be a reason for English speakers to make use of a word that speakers of other languages clearly feel is inappropriate or useless, and I think that the reason has a lot to do with the enormous distance from which the British and the Americans tend, or tended, to see the spectacular developments that took place in art and literature in the last two decades of the 19th century and in the first two decades of the 20th. At no other time in history have the arts gone through such dramatic transformations internally, through a critical dynamic that made each brief moment of new artistic life mean the death of the previous one. It was in that way that Fauvism and Expressionism meant, in a sense, the obsolescence of Impressionism, and Cubism that of Fauvism. But the English and the Americans missed the emotional nature of this experience. When these transformations took place, they were happening mainly in Paris, and to some extent, in Munich and Berlin. A few British and Americans lived in Paris

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for a while, Gertrude Stein for much of her life, and Joyce and Pound for brief periods, but the British and the Americans generally missed out, they were not there, and for a long, long while, they were not interested. They felt it had nothing to do with them, with British or American experience. It was only long after it had all happened, that is, beginning in the 1930s and particularly after the Second World War, that American collectors began to interest themselves in modern art, raising the prices thereby and turning people like Picasso into millionaires.

If we consider the word "Modernism" from this perspective, I think the problem we had in trying to understand its untranslatability begins to clear up. The word's reference takes over an enormous lapse of time, similar in its length to that covered by the word "Renaissance", which refers to something far away, very removed from us chronologically. The difference here is that the revolution in the arts that had as its centre Paris, and to some extent Munich and Berlin, happened very far away from the British and Americans, not chronologically or even geographically, but conceptually. British and American art did not begin to behave like continental art until long after the most important stages in the artistic revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were over. By then, by the time the earliest museums of modern art began to be founded in the US, modern art was at a different stage, that of collecting and preserving the works produced during its most exciting early stages. There *was* new modern art that was being produced internationally from the 1930s on, and some of it was being produced in Britain and in the US, New York having by then become the new centre of the art market. But at that point the excitement, the feeling of risk that had accompanied the rise of Impressionism, or of Fauvism, or of Cubism, had worn off. Art no longer had the same kind of centrality to the culture, or the same capacity to shock the viewer, and, for the US, it became a financial, and after the Second World War, a political matter. I say this because both the Guggenheim and the MoMA in New York were created in 1939. Much art that escaped being burnt by the Nazis as "degenerate art" had been bought by Americans immediately before the fall of Paris and ended up either in museums or in private collections there. And after 1945, Modern Art became a weapon in the Cold War. Because the Soviets favoured "Socialist realism", the US, from the end of the Second World War, felt it had to identify with modern art, not the early stages which Americans had missed out altogether and could not have much to do with other than hoard it, but with a later stage in modern art, a stage in which they could see themselves, or their artists and writers, as taking part. At the

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same time, they needed *their* modern art, the international modern art they now saw themselves, or their artists, as contributing to, to be continuous with that of the risky, exciting stages in the late 19th century and in the years immediately preceding the First World War. And for that purpose, they also needed an *-ism*; an *-ism* that could suggest that excitement, the kind of atmospheric halo that had surrounded words like "Cubism" and "Futurism" in the 1910s. The way to do this, the way to suggest that American art was in a sense "the same thing" as the international art that had been centred in Paris from the 1870s to the mid-1920s, was to incorporate the whole history of modern art into an *-ism*, an *-ism* that could also include American art of the 1940s and 1950s and later.

So that is the main reason why the word exists in English today. It served its purpose in the decades of the Cold War, but the usefulness, for the Americans and the British, of using such an embarrassingly ignorant and politically interested word to refer to literature and art, is no longer there. And that is why the word should disappear; that is why we should avoid using it. "Modern" and "Modernity" will do the job a lot better, particularly since they avoid the suggestion of cultural provincialism that this tricky word "Modernism" carries for the alert reader.

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