Contradictions: A study of the Culture of the Modern

By Kate Barker
November 28, 2012

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes)

–Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" *Leaves of Grass*, 1855

Whitman, writing thirty years before most scholars periodize modernism, managed to foreshadow an essence of the age to come. Modernism does contradict itself while simultaneously containing multitudes. In an effort to chart the historiographic comparisons of this complex, even fluid construct, I have chosen to survey 11 texts examining modernism in Europe and North America written by 10 different cultural, literary and social historians in an effort to make sense of what we mean by the culture of the modern.

Stephen Kern manages to best encapsulate the essence of modernism and how it intersected so many different cultural planes and constructs in *The Culture of Time and Space*. Kern offers as solid an analytic grounding as possible in the apparently ever-shifting sands of modernist thought. Kern proposes that late nineteenth century European technological developments as well as cultural changes in many different fields, but particularly in physics and psychiatry, as well as art and literature, revolutionized the way people perceived time and space. This shift in perception, he argues, is critical to understanding the culture of the modern. His cross-disciplinary approach is repeatedly evidenced in the work of other historians, who, with the exception of Lears, all appeared after Kern's groundbreaking 1983 book. They also echo Kern's contextualization of the modern. Starting with Kern's text as an analytic hub, it is therefore possible to work our way out, and explore some of the many different spokes of modernist argument.

Matt Matsuda's *The Memory of the Modern, for example,* augments Kern's analysis of the Freudian past by delving more deeply into the notion of memory across a multidisciplinary framework. Ann Douglas takes a similarly Kernsian approach, particularly in relation to other Freudian constructs like the primitive id

when she locates the apex of modernism in 1920s New York in her book *Terrible Honesty*. Further examination of modernist literature, writers, artists and art is handled very differently by Modris Eksteins in both *Rites of Spring* and his latest work, *Solar Dance*, but also references Kern, as do William Everdell's *The First Moderns* and Frederick Karl's *Modern and Modernism.* Technological changes and altering perceptions of time certainly influence Ben Singer's analysis *Melodrama and Modernity*. Singer also looks at how the changes in perception of gender infused the modern Freudian consciousness as evidenced in melodrama, a thread that Rita Felski weaves into a denser fabric in *The Gender of Modernity*.

Finally, modernism cannot be studied without a thoughtful consideration of the tensions it created. The complex constructions of antimodernism are richly explored in Jackson Lear's trailblazing cultural history *No Place of Grace*, while the more recently published *The Quest of the Folk* by Ian McKay traces a similar Canadian antimodernist response to perceptions of overcivilization in Nova Scotia and the search for the authentic. Most of the cited authors adopt the interdisciplinary approach forged by Lears and Kern, the only reasonable method when it comes to evaluating the multitudinous contradictions of the modern culture.

Before delving into that culture, it is first necessary to attempt to define it. What is modern versus modernism, and when did modernism predominate? What qualities do we attribute to the modernist construct and who were the modernists? Modern is almost too vast a term to be useful. There is no one agreed upon period that covers the modern, though many scholars subdivide it into early modern, extending as far back as the late Middle Ages, and modern, dating roughly from the dawn of industrialization. Most of the historians in this analysis, with the exception of Eksteins' later text, focus their study of modernism from the 1880s, (marked by the beginning of significant technological, social and cultural developments) through the 1920s (before the Depression). But modernism is much more than a time period. In fact, for many, it defies temporal categorization altogether. Some argue, for example, that there is no such thing as post modernism, and that we are still

immersed in the struggles that define the modern age.[1] Frederick Karl insists, "Modern and modernism are characterized by their languages."[2] He goes on to explain that modern literature and poetry introduce a new language, as do modern art, music and dance through innovative use of colour, geometry, sound and arrangement. This is certainly a part of what we mean by modernism, but the term defies a neatly packaged definition. Everdell sums up our apparent confusion best:

> The educated reader uses the term "Modernism" all the time, possessed of certain spreadeagled definitions learned, perhaps, in courses in art history or twentieth-century fiction and reinforced by daily trips through the glass canyons of downtown; but in fact we know less about it than we do about any other –ism – very little indeed…Unlike Modernism, none of these others requires us to understand a bit of everything and to indulge in the wholesale crossing of what we have come, in the twentieth century, to call "disciplinary barriers."[3]

Conceiving of modernism as a variety show of contradiction, involving different disciplines, time frames, cultures and inventions, is useful in analyzing a period renowned for spectacle. Modernism is scripted with myriad scientific theories and technological and social innovations, staged during a time of extreme worldwide political upheaval. Together, these events set the scene for a fin-de-siècle performance largely influenced by Einstein and Freud, in a climate marked by an increasingly accelerated world of mass production, urbanization, widespread capitalism, imperialism, racism, growing secularism, revolution and word war. The actors experienced contradictory tensions in virtually every cultural and social construction, between public and private; autonomy and anonymity; feminine and masculine and between authenticity and artifice. The historians examined here view

---

[1] William R Everdell, *The First Moderns*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4

[2] Frederick R Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885 –1925*. (New York: Atheneum, 1985), xi.

[3] William R Everdell, *The First Moderns*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

this mass performance from different perspectives in the audience, together arriving at complimentary notions of what constitutes modernism.

For a definition of post-modern, Everdell's analysis is once again apt. "Restless academics and other employees of the culture factory who launched "Structuralism" in the 1960s tried out a new term in the 1970s, "Post-Modernism," hoping to apply it to the last fifty years or so of Western culture."[4] Evidently, the debate over modernist/post-modernist is still ongoing, and not one I propose to delve into deeply here.

Supporting the structure of Kern's book and predicating his analysis of modernism, is the notion of time and space. Here, Kern establishes Einstein's contributions to the modernist Zeitgeist as critical. Everdell concurs, including Einstein in his roundup of the first moderns. Einstein's first theory of relativity, developed in 1905, had an immense impact on the modern mind, according to Kern. He quotes Einstein's own succinct summary: "there is an infinite number of spaces, which are in motion with respect to each other."[5] This theory fed modernist notions of simultaneity and perceptions of speed.

Simultaneity marked the modern. Kern sets this up beautifully in his book, using the sinking of the *Titanic* as its symbol. News of the disaster quickly spread, even as it was taking place. "This was simultaneous drama on the high seas, driven by steam power and choreographed by the magic of wireless telegraphy."[6] He goes on to explain its significance. "The ability to experience many distant events at the same time, made possible by the wireless and dramatized by the sinking of the *Titanic* was part of a major change in the experience of the present."[7] That change, the understanding that people could experience many things at the same time, extended into the art world. Kern cites Cubism as the obvious example. "Just as in physics space was recognized as both constituent and active with atomic theory and field theory, so in art space was realized in two positive modes. Its constituent

---

[4] Ibid., 3.
[5] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880 – 1918*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 136.
[6] Ibid., 66.
[7] Ibid., 67-68.

function was most explicit in the Cubist representation of the space between objects."[8] He notes Picasso's remark to Gertrude Stein in 1915 that Cubists had invented camouflage[9] and also cites Gertrude Stein's famous observation that World War One was a Cubist war.[10]

Other historians add to the discussion of simultaneity as a defining characteristic of the modern sensibility. "Simultaneism, working with plasticity, allowed the artist to create order by way of contrast or conflict. Logic is out. Time is itself telescoped,"[11] argues Karl, in relation to French poet, playwright and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire. It is a theory he also ascribes to Cubists, Marcel Proust, and several modernist stream of consciousness writers as well. Douglas goes a step further in analysing simultaneity in American literature by equating Gertrude Stein's unique voice to the multi-faceted immigrant culture peculiar to America. "Stein's sense of what happens to language, what it sounds and feels like as one learns it, as one approaches it from the viewpoint of another language and culture, was the basis for her famed style."[12]

The concept that multi-faceted planes intersect and interact simultaneously is perhaps best evidenced in Eksteins' thesis in the *Rites of Spring*. He hinges his entire argument on the notion of simultaneity. Eksteins uses dance as an allegory. He argues that Modernism began with the opening night performance of one dance, Stravinsky's highly syncopated, disjointed and apparently discordant "Rites of Spring," performed in Paris in May 1913. The dance symbolized the modern age, ending in the virgin's/soldier's sacrifice to ensure life's continuance. For Eksteins, that pivotal modernist moment was July 1, 1916 marked by the senseless slaughter of 60,000 British troops on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.[13] From that point on, Eksteins marks the end of the old, knowable order. After that, the world

---

[8] Ibid., 162.
[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] Ibid., 288.
[11] Frederick R Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885 –1925*. (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 271.
[12] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 120.
[13] Ibid., 203.

became a modernist interpretive dance of death. "The whole landscape of the Western Front became surrealist before the term surrealism was invented by the soldier-poet Guillaume Apollinaire,"[14] he argues. When war is declared, Eksteins sums up the mood in Germany: "The activity that evening, throughout the city, resembles an enormous celebration after a successful first-night performance by a cast of hundreds of thousands. Berlin had a cast party."[15] In this context, Eksteins paints war as culture and performance, with writers and artists among those most swept up in the wave of war fever.

Einstein's influence on the modernists is also evidenced in notions of speed and accelerated time. Kern even extends this to a causal factor of World War One, attributing the failure of European diplomats to negotiate the volume and speed of telegraph and telephone communication to a breakdown of diplomacy. "Diplomacy is an art of timing," he concludes.[16] Timing, for Einstein, and in this case, for Kern, is everything. The establishment of standard time, the transmission of the first time signal from the Eiffel tower in 1913, and the soldiers' widespread use of the wristwatch during World War One all contributed to a heightened cultural awareness of public time, and the ideas that time was running out.[17] The industrial capitalists' introduction of timed work on the assembly line and new studies in time management designed to increase worker productivity also contributed to a heightened temporal anxiety. The modern obsession with speed and time is well cited by other historians. "The moderns had been excited by turbulence, speed, and revolution," Eksteins tells us in *Solar Dance*.[18] Singer points out that this is evidenced in early film, which was literally shaped by speed, depending on how quickly the individual projectionist fed the film through the projector. Different,

---

[14] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 146.
[15] Ibid., 61.
[16] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880 – 1918*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 274.
[17] Ibid., 14.
[18] Modris Eksteins, *Solar Dance*: Genius, Forgery and the Crisis of Truth in the Modern Age. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 61.

"high-tech" effects were also achieved in early movies simply by reversing film sequence or by running film through at an accelerated pace. Early melodramatic serials were all about speed, as Singer demonstrates. "Movies delivered abundant, rapid action, stimulating violence, spectacular sights, and the thrills of physical peril, abductions and suspenseful rescues," he says, reflecting the modern obsession with accelerated time.[19] Many of those melodramas also incorporated the idea of time literally running out and the thrill of speed as a plot device, from the image of the heroine tied to the railway tracks to the spectacular chase sequence. Time running out is also a recurrent theme in Douglas's analysis of modernist art in Manhattan, specifically referencing the self-destructive and often foreshortened lives of its most talented practitioners. Here, she relates the idea of borrowed time from the retrospection of F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1931:

> His generation had indulged in "the gaudiest spree in history"; the decade was "borrowed time." "Borrowed time" suggests extra time, illegal hours, time out from some appointed combat; it hints at a sinister version of the installment plan, the notion of something apparently gotten for nothing, for free, "a prize for everyone," as he put it, which in fact entails an even steeper price to pay in the near and unimaginable future.[20]

Douglas points out that by the age of 44, Fitzgerald's time, like that of so many other brilliant modernist writers, artists and performers, had run out early. He succumbed to terminal alcoholism in 1940.

The other major player in Kern's assessment of modernism is Sigmund Freud. Without his analysis of the past, the idea of the primitive id, the establishment of the human norm as a masculine construction, and Freud's focus on ambivalence, our notion of modernism would have to be re-written. Freud drew on several fin-de-siècle theories developed in the 1880s pertaining to memory in order to develop his own version of recollection and repression. German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus published his 1885 treatise *On Memory*, establishing his still-recognized curve of forgetting. (In essence, he proves that under typical conditions, human

---

[19] Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 192.
[20] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 471.

beings retain only 20 per cent of what they experience over a two-week period.) France's Théodule-Armand Ribot's similar work on the erosion of memory was published in 1882. Kern asserts that "many of these findings on memory, forgetting, and the role of childhood were incorporated in the great retrospective system of the period – psychoanalysis."[21] Freud argued that the most distant past was the most formative when it came to the psyche, and it was during early childhood that critical memories and sexual impulses were repressed. Kern describes him "like an archaeologist excavating for lost structures in the earth's crust." Freud dug to uncover his patients' neuroses, and all of those neuroses had their origins in early childhood.[22] Kern links these psychoanalytical theories of memory to the development of the Proustian past, which began when one childhood recollection came flooding back to Marcel Proust in 1909, prompting him to write his opus *Remembrance of Things Past*:

> If there is a single illusion that Proust wanted to dispel it is that life takes place primarily in space. The spaces in which we live close about us and disappear like the waters of the sea after a ship passes through: it only exists as the memory of a flow of its uninterrupted movement in time.[23]

Matsuda takes the torch from Kern, extending the theory of Freudian memory infusing the age and applying it across the landscape of the modernist culture. Here, Matsuda summarizes his thesis: "Ranging from politics to neuroscience, imperialism to entertainment, what I have sought is to characterize the "memory" of an age not with a singular definition, but through multiple understandings of how it was evoked through nostalgia, commemoration, repetition, trace, ancestor, heritage, patrimony and tradition in apparently dissimilar contexts and situations."[24]

Freud's categorization of the id as the basest part of the human psyche, motivated entirely by the pleasure principal, was perhaps most evidenced in

---

[21] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880 – 1918*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 41.
[22] Ibid., 44.
[23] Ibid., 50.
[24] Matt K. Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206.

modernist racist constructions of evolutionary theory and put into practice through colonialism and the persecution of non-whites in America. Here, Freud's legacy had lasting and damaging effects. Douglas argues "the discipline of anthropology, heavily influenced by Freud and his equation of modern neurosis with the savage" and the "primitive mind," was in its formative stages in the early decades of the twentieth century."[25] These theories, she argues, fed into the American fear of a racial uprising against the ruling white class. Matsuda explains how Freudian notions of primitivism and anthropological racism could be given a Kernsian twist. "The memory of the other: though framed in terms of black and white, such arguments about "racial" antagonism were not exclusively about skin colors or physical features … The worlds in New Caledonia exploded over race–defined a particular way; not only as a discrimination of color and culture, but a biology of time and space. Race was defined for the colonialists in the shadow of that great totem of the nineteenth century–civilization."[26] Matsuda argues that race and civilization were inextricably linked, and the "civilized" were of white, protestant, Anglo-Saxon stock. Karl takes a different tact, explaining the legacy of Freudian-inspired racism not through modernism, but through its flip side; antimodernism. "The degeneration theorists were obsessed not only with women, but even more virulently with race,"[27] he says. He explains that degeneration theories were typically based on racist assumptions, and on anti-Semitism in particular. "The degeneration critics shrewdly debased Modernism by lumping it with elements society had agreed to oppose: feminism, racial equality, criminalism, anarchy, socialism and the radical left, disruption of family life, threats to tradition and custom. By establishing that equation, such critics could whip Modernism as a way of reestablishing historical

---

[25] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 49.
[26] Matt K. Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 157.
[27] Frederick R Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885 –1925*. (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 93.

traditions."[28] For Karl, degeneration theory was a strictly reactionary, antimodernist response.

Another of Freud's overwhelming contributions to the culture of the modern was his successful masculinization of that culture. After Freud, the model of the human norm became exclusively male, while the female became the Other. Modernism was marked by the killing off of the Victorian mother ideal, and replacing her with a childish and entirely non-threatening ideal of the new woman. Douglas, Felski and Singer have much to contribute to the discussion. Douglas argues that the Victorian matriarch was "hunted down in the twentieth century by the forces of masculinization bound together in that backlash we know as modernism."[29] She cites Hemingway's estrangement from his mother as emblematic of the matricidal nature of the modernist, and cites many examples of the literal and figurative slaying of the mother figure in modernist literature, including Hemingway's first and unpublished story *In Our Time*.[30] Douglas concludes that Freudian matricide was a critical component of modern culture. "The slaying of the Titaness, the Mother God of the Victorian era, was the most important instigation of the modern urban era, and the bias for its central ethos, "terrible honesty."[31] She convincingly explains that the earthy appeal of Jewish singer Sophie Tucker, billed as the Last of the Red-hot Mamas with her booming voice and full figure, typified an earlier, powerful female sexuality. By contrast, she positions white, protestant dancer Irene Castle as the desexualized, non-confrontational, thin, boyish ideal of the new modernist woman.[32]

Felski, by analyzing modernist social theories, novels, melodramas, art and the political speeches of suffragettes, adds to the feminist critique of Freudian

---

[28] Ibid., 94.
[29] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 241.
[30] Ibid., 244.
[31] Ibid., 252.
[32] Ibid., 358.

modernism. She says “the quasi vegetative tranquility”[33] that Freudian sociologist Georg Simmel attributes to women, places them outside the culture, and quotes Simmel to make the point: “woman lies … like an immovable prehistoric boulder in the landscape of modernity.”[34] She asserts that “the feminization of modernity is largely synonymous with its demonization.”[35] As examples, she draws on depictions of female characters as insatiable, uncontrollable consumers in the new, public department store setting of Emile Zola’s novels *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *Nana,* and as wholly uncritical guzzlers of melodrama in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary.*[36] Felski points out that concurrently, new negative social inventions of the modern age came to be associated exclusively with the feminine. The emergence of another Freudian disease, kleptomania, is perceived to be a wholly feminine and modern sexual pathology.[37] The word kitsch, coined in the 1870s and meaning cheap, quickly produced art, also came to be associated exclusively with women.[38]

Singer turns notions of traditional femininity on its head in his analysis of the new woman as she is depicted in modernist melodrama. He highlights the popularity of the “plucky girl reporter” Kate Swan, and her feats of derring-do in the late 1890s.[39] He also points to the depiction of women performing nontraditional heroic feats in melodramas as emancipatory images. “The genre’s focus on female heroic agency both memorialized an actual expansion of women’s sphere of experience and, as vicarious fantasy, suggested the ongoing constraints of conventional definitions of gender.”[40] He also notes the complete absence of the

---

[33] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47.

[34] Ibid., 47.
[35] Ibid., 62.
[36] Ibid., 62.
[37] Ibid., 69.
[38] Ibid., 118.
[39] Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 250.
[40] Ibid., 253.

mother figure from all serial-queen melodramas. The woman as heroine had to be motherless, young and single.[41]

The final Freudian construct the Kern and other historians weave through the modernist narrative is one of ambivalence. Lears bases the title of his book on these lines taken from T.S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday:"

> No place of grace for those who avoid face
> No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

Lears argues that this poem "represents antimodern ambivalence in its most finely distilled and sublimated form."[42] It represents the "cosmic struggle between doubt and faith,"[43] leaving the speaker in a numbing no-man's land of deadened emotion, a logical response to the overstimulation of the modern world. Ambivalence figures largely in other antimodernist constructions. Karl draws parallels to Freud's ambivalence, linking neurasthenia (then perceived as a uniquely modern, urban disease of sexual neurosis) to modernist artistic expression. Karl explains that "Freud's image for the transference of sexual tension into anxiety has something of the artist's sense of how a creative idea is expressed, or how it must emerge."[44]

Another critical force at play in the antimodernist sensibility is the quest for the authentic. This is a theme supporting many of the texts, but is particularly present in Lears and McKay's studies of the antimodernist culture, as well as Eksteins' *Solar Dance*. Lears contextualizes the quest for the authentic as what he terms a crisis of cultural authority. He couches this in a Marxist cultural theory, borrowing from Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony. "Gramsci stressed the importance of shared values in maintaining class domination," Lears explains in his preface.[45] He argues that the work of Freud and like-minded sociologists

---

[41] Ibid., 258.
[42] Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 312.
[43] Ibid., 312.
[44] Frederick R Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885 –1925*. (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 136.
[45] Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of*

paradoxically "helped explain how people like antimodern dissenters could half-consciously help to create a sleeker, modern culture they neither understood nor desired."[46] This also explains why Lears calls T.S. Eliot an antimodern modernist. Antimodernism, for Lears, was not a kneejerk, reactionary, non-productive backlash, but brought its own complex values to the already over-laden modernest table.

The idea that the authentic can be recaptured by a return to the folk is explored at length by both Lears and McKay. Lears cites the popularity of fairies, elves and other mythical folk figures in wildly popular works of the era, including J.M. Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan* that appealed to both adults and children. Lears argues this isn't merely an antimodernist regressive escape to childhood, but a much more complex notion that indulging in fantasy provided the modern mind with a vacation from its inherent stresses.[47] "It was no accident that the hunger for fantasy coincided with widespread alarm over nervous prostration. Beset by self-doubts and anxieties, the neurasthenic felt drawn into Merlin's world,"[48] he says.

McKay unearths the details of the folk movement in Nova Scotia from the fin-de-siècle to the 1950s, noting that the quest for the authentic when it came to recording folk music, and the creation of folk handicrafts were, paradoxically, entirely artificial and manufactured processes. The authenticity seeking Helen Creighton, Nova Scotia's self-proclaimed curator of "real" folk music ended up recording only those songs that fell within her limited, urban definition of what constituted true folk music. She actually erased the bawdier recordings made by tipsy Nova Scotia fishermen. Similarly, Mary Black, the state-imposed tourism craft coordinator, built an "authentic" government-run, for profit folk handicraft industry in a community that had virtually no tradition of handicrafts. The book is a delightful case study in irony that clearly echoes Lear's cultural hegemony thesis.

Eksteins tackles the quest for the authentic in an entirely different way in *Solar Dance*. Once again, he uses a parable to weave his argument. Eksteins argues

---

American Culture 1880 – 1920. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), xii.
[46] Ibid., xiii
[47] Ibid., 170-172.
[48] Ibid., 170-172.

that a crisis of truth, characterized by the modern age, culminated in the famous Van Gogh forgery trial of Otto Wacker in Germany during the Weimar Republic. Van Gogh, the most popular artist of all time (posthumously) was a symbol of modernism. Eksteins quotes the poet Rupert Brooke: "Nietzsche is our Bible" and "Van Gogh our idol."[49] Many, including Hitler's minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, considered Van Gogh a Christ-like figure.[50] Eksteins is the only historian in this analysis who strays from the fin-de-siècle to 1929 periodization of the modernists. There's a reason for this; his book is not just about modernists and antimodernism. It is an argument explaining the breakdown of cultural and moral values during the inter-war years in Germany, a failure that he insists left a gaping hole through which the National Socialists goose-stepped in 1933:

> If authenticity was assaulted and denigrated, as it clearly was in the Wacker Affair and in the Weimar period as a whole, then there was nothing solid left to hold onto. The entire middle-class belief system was gutted. This void Hitler and Nazism would fill with their fantasy world of myth and mastery.[51]

Solar Dance, at its heart, is also a *Sonderweg* thesis, arguing that Germany took a particular path that ultimately resulted in the Holocaust.

It seems fitting to conclude with the modernist rise of secularism and its concomitant tension in the quest for the sublime. Put another way, people don't change, only their gods do. Eksteins tell us, "Weimar had deprived Germany of its gods. The sense of loss was profound. We too have dispatched our gods and replaced them with celebrities."[52] Felski reminds us of Zola's department store as a "cathedral of modern commerce."[53] Eksteins notes that after Charles Lindberg's triumphant post-Atlantic crossing "people sought relics from his person and his

---

[49] Modris Eksteins, *Solar Dance*: Genius, Forgery and the Crisis of Truth in the Modern Age. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 56.
[50] Ibid., 113.
[51] Ibid., 222.
[52] Ibid., 278.
[53] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 67.

plane as if he were some new god."[54] Eksteins even calls him "the new Christ."[55] A decade before, writer Julius Meier-Graf proclaimed, "Van Gogh was the Christ of modern art."[56] Lears argues that the rise of high Anglicanism was an antimodernist response to the Puritan tensions in a consumer age. The appeal of Catholic symbolism in an era when those symbols were emptied of mystic meaning was the draw.[57] The modernist struggle to find meaning in a secular age speaks, once again to the complex and contradictory nature of an era and culture that historians still struggle to contain.

Bibliography

---

[54] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 247.
[55] Ibid., 243.
[56] Modris Eksteins, *Solar Dance*: Genius, Forgery and the Crisis of Truth in the Modern Age. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 50.

[57] Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 198-199.

Douglas, Ann. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1995.

Eksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

Eksteins, Modris. *Solar Dance*: Genius, Forgery and the Crisis of Truth in the Modern Age. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

Everdell, William R. *The First Moderns*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Karl, Frederick R. *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885 –1925*. New York: Atheneum, 1985.

Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880 – 1918*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Lears, Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

McKay, Ian. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

Matsuda, Matt K. *The Memory of the Modern*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*: (Comprising all of the Poems Written by Walt Whitman Following the Arrangement of the Edition of 1891-92.) New York: The Modern Library, 1985.