Rites of Spring
and the birth
of modernism

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Rites of Spring:
The Great War and
the Birth of the Modern Age
by Modris Eksteen

What makes Rites of Spring a daring piece of cultural history are the creative ways in which Eksteen brings, though he is not always successful, to explore the links between specific historical events and larger cultural trends. Through a series of tableaux — the opening night of Igor Stravinsky’s ballet The Rite of Spring, Berlin on the eve of the declaration of war, trench warfare on the Western Front — Eksteen registers the emotional tone and psychological temper of an emerging modernist Zeitgeist. As with so many cultural historians who write about this period, there is, however, an unhesitant assurance that modernism led to a Gottsdämmerung, where all is terror and destruction. In this conceptualisation, Eksteen misrepresents the broader spirit and tradition of modernism.

Eksteen begins his work, appropriately enough, with the looming imagery of death symbolised by Venice, that ghostly city of imagination and decay, where Richard Wagner, Sergei Diaghilev, and Thomas Mann’s Aschenbach died. The scene quickly moves to Paris in 1913 and the opening night of Stravinsky’s ballet The Rite of Spring. The ballet centres on a maiden who sacrifices herself by yielding not to some higher moral value but to the dark instincts of nature. A call for the release of those spontaneous emotions that middle class morals had suppressed, the ballet was also a harbinger of the war to come, with its seating message of national renewal and violent sacrifice.

Everything about The Rite of Spring, writes Eksteen, suggested newness as well as a considerable German influence. The Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, where the ballet premiered, had opened two months earlier, and its ultramodern, clean-cut, architectural lines made it look foreign, or, to use an euphemism of the times, decidedly “German.” Sergei Diaghilev, dandy, aesthete and director of the Ballets Russes, wanted The Rite to be a total art form, a Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk where beauty and a spiritual life force are expressed in all their facets. Valtur Nijinsky, at that time Diaghilev’s lover, was chosen to be the choreographer. Inspired by the aesthetics of eurhythmics, another German import that emphasised rhythm and gymnastics, Nijinsky was to radicalise the performance by using jarring movements, wild derivées and knock-kneed contortions. With all this concentrated talent and wilful desire to make it new the ballet became a “milestone in the development of modernism,” for it had many of the emphatic qualities of this novel aesthetic: the fascination with the new and primitive, the blurring of the boundaries separating thought and action, art and reality, and the heightened irrational urge to hurl oneself towards self-annihilation.

On the eve of the war, argues Eksteen, “Germany was the foremost representative of innovation and renewal,” and modernist aesthetics had advanced further there than in any other European country. German economic and military might were certainly unmatched in 1914. At the same time German ideology was preoccupied with the underlying forces which combined primitivist instincts with mysticism. The popular distinction the Germans made just prior to the war between Zivilisation and Kultur further exemplified their tendency to go hunting for repressed arts and questionable desires. Anglo-French civilisation, the Germans believed, was based on rationalism, empiricism, utility, but it was superficial and devoid of spiritual values. German Kultur, on the other hand, was concerned with inner freedom and authenticity, had true depth, and lacked the hypocrisy of bourgeois civility.

What distinguished the Germany of this period was a profound moral, a peculiar view of the individual and society and a deep sense of cultural difference. The stress on German uniqueness, the longing it satisfied and the role it played in politics, can also be linked to Germany’s related modernisation. Within a short span of time (1870-1900), and relatively late within the context of European industrialisation, Germany made tremendous economic and technical advances; even some liberal ones, as Eksteen firmly emphasises: it had the biggest socialist party, more women gainfully employed than any other industrial nation, and the largest gay movement in Europe. Yet Germany failed to produce a liberal state and a self-confident bourgeoisie with its own political aspirations. Max Weber and other social analysts lamented the fact that in Germany the bourgeoisie remained under the spell of feudal and aristocratic values; moreover, industrialisation, as A.J.P. Taylor notes, was being forced by the authoritarian state and “shot up in luxury, unnatural growth.”

Eksteen conveniently evades an examination of Germany’s conservative modernisation, choosing instead to emphasise the “psychic disorientation” brought on by industrialisation and the nostalgic and illusory aspects of German cultural politics: “Germanness became a question of imagination, myth and inwardness — in short, of fantasy.” Since inwardness, irrationality, rebellion, and desire for the new are some of the defining characteristics of modernism, Eksteen finds it easy to equate Germany with modernism: “The German experience,” he writes, “lies at the heart of the modern experience.” But it is more
accurate to say that the German experience, lacking both the social and political basis for a robust modernism, encouraged the regula-
tion and repression of the movement. Modernism can be generally described as a rage against accredited values in a relentless demand for authenticity, and challenges the accepted ways of doing things. It is caught up in no one’s hands, as it is killed. But these are the main themes and political power. In France and England, épuiser le bourgeois had an aggressive, polemic edge that opened an ambiguous space and permitted the oppositional avant-garde to intervene in the creation of a modern culture. Here modernism was distinguished by a desire to destroy but also by a willingness to create and remember the utopian past of the current avant-garde and to question the complacent and self-satisfied middle class tried to repress. German modernism, on the other hand, lacking a politically powerful bourgeoisie to challenge and prod into action, escaped into a Romantic longing for totality, absolute freedom, and nihilism. In a sense, German modernism and its avant-garde were not, as Ekelstein asserts, more advanced than in other European countries, but were simply more prone to release a critique of bourgeois values with irrational flirtations. It constantly enthralled and subtly empowered reactionary ideas of Logophòtaphie, the notion of an aesthetic “life experience” that went beyond rational justification. These ideas, of course, were later to be supremely useful to a state capitalism in crisis.

When the war finally broke out in August of 1914, a psychological threshold was crossed by all the belligerent nations and the war could not but impress itself on the psyche of the soldier who fought in it. The middle section of Ekelstein’s book concentrates on how the war was originally perceived by the German, French and English soldiers and the apalling conditions of trench warfare. A good part of this section relies on letters the soldiers sent home from the front, giving us a graphic description of the daily routines of trench life. Ekelstein’s analysis of the psychological motivations of the major belligerents, on the other hand, reads like a caricature of the Germans. The Germans “regarded the war as a spiritual conflict,” writes Ekelstein. The English, in contrast, were motivated by “a spirit of sportmanship, a sense of fair play, and democracy. The war was for them a game.” Little understanding is gained by these questionable comparisons. On the surface, some of Ekelstein’s assertions sound plausible. But when he viewed the war has been most readily inclined to question the prevailing bourgeois values of the nineteenth century, he argues, they were in a better position to bluntly change the international standards of behaviour in war. It was they who had initiated the defensive posture of trench warfare, stellungenkring, and were the first to use poison gas to the trenches, to attack cities from the skies with zeppelins, and to use submarine warfare. German innovation is adroitly linked by Ekelstein with Germany’s modernist spirit. Perhaps it is true they had other reasons for German tactical surprises. The Germans, like the Allies, had hoped for a quick war. When the Schliefen plan, which had relied on a lightning attack, stumbled at the Western Front, the Germany were faced with a war of attrition. By 1916 a large part of a generation had been wiped out, and there was a general feeling of despair and crisis. Germany was its father, it has given birth to us and took gambles that were motivated less by any modernist dynamics than by sheer desperation.

Ekelstein’s treatment of the war experience, while a restatement of more conventional interpretations, is more to the point. Those soldiers who participated in the moral struggle of trench warfare were politicised by the camaraderie they shared in the trenches and the hatreds of the enemy, as occurred on Christmas of 1914, and is vividly described by Ekelstein, when German, English and French soldiers took off time from the war to exchange and friendship and gifts. But if the war offered the Western Front, the Germany was a race of a nearly constant destiny emerged. The feeling of being bound by the experiences of death and survival was extended even to the enemy, as occurred on Christmas of 1914, and is vividly described by Ekelstein, when German, English and French soldiers took off time from the war to exchange and friendship and gifts. The war offered the Western Front, the Germany was a race of a nearly constant destiny emerged. The feeling of being bound by the experiences of death and survival was extended even to the enemy, as occurred on Christmas of 1914, and is vividly described by Ekelstein, when German, English and French soldiers took off time from the war to exchange and friendship and gifts. But if the war offered the Western Front, the Germany was a race of a nearly constant destiny emerged. The feeling of being bound by the experiences of death and survival was extended even to the enemy, as occurred on Christmas of 1914, and is vividly described by Ekelstein, when German, English and French soldiers took off time from the war to exchange and friendship and gifts.
shadow of the Great War and modernism. This is some sort of answer, but a very in- complete one. No one will deny that fascism, informed by the spirit of modernism, aestheticised politics and confused the lines between theatre and political action. Walter Benjamin, while casting a glance on the Italian Futurists, made that point very clear. But to speak broadly of modernism, as Elstien's does, without grounding the social origins of the movements in different countries, is to invite prole induction. From the start German modernism held all the tensions of a con- servative modernisation and this impelled it to move in a very different direction than either England or France. Unable to grow up in a sophisticated tradition of re- resistance, German modernism failed to deal with underlying contradictions: knowing how to manage its impure of modernism, the subjective and the irrational without being its deepest political and artistic convictions of freedom. Only in Weimar Germany did an emancipatory modernist project emerge, but that was cut short by the rise of fascism which reinforced its darker aspects. It is little wonder, then, that the contemporary German critic Jiirgen Habermas argues that the emancipatory dimensions of German modernism re- mained not only unfulfilled but are cur- rently under siege by antimodernist intellect- ual influences. Habermas has been an outspoken defender of what he calls high modernism against the aesthetic and politi- cal encroachments of postmodernism which in his view is a predominantly neo- conservative movement.

Rites of Spring is a provocative book. It took an audacious feat of imagination to sustain an argument that links the sacrificial dancer in Daghilev's ballet with the bloody experience of the First World War and the aspirations and failures of modernism, but Elstien's fractured and free- associative approach,which crams the likes of Josephine Baker, Isadora Duncan, Cocteau, Hitler and the music of Wagner into one pomegranate sentence also pre- vents him from making important critical distinctions. What is absent from his analy- sis are the hard comparisons, a systematic approach, and a formulation of modernism that is sensitive to nuances as well as national and social differences. What gives us is a modernist aesthetic that is di- vorced from the more concrete and argu- able instances of politics, economics and social movements. One would have wished that Elstien would confront these vital issues, but perhaps that is asking too much from a historian who is the consummate German Idealist. He shares in that tradi- tion's worship of the Idea and in its belief of the primacy of art, and, it seems, he also shares in the neo-conservative abhorrence for a modernism which unleashed "hido- nistic and "irrational" motives that were incompatible with the ordered and reliable values of a traditional world.

Postmodernism and its discontents

GAIL MCGREGOR

A Politics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction
by Linda Hutcheon

The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction
by Linda Hutcheon

Whatever she one may say about her, Linda Hutcheon has to be consid- ered a success story. Content aside, the very shape of her career marks her as one of the best strategists to come down the pike in years. Talk about being in the right place — intellectually speaking — at the right time! In 1980 this then-novice is clearly self-identified as a formalist. A scant few years later — just in time to anticipate the stampede for the handcart — she has mastered, by dint largely of relabelling, to transform herself into the guru of Canadian postmodernism. And a worthy guru she is. Proving the old adage about the predilection of academics for the sound of their own voices, recent years have seen a veritable mushrooming of the Hutcheon genre. Essays, articles, lectures, working papers, reviews, colloquia, even entire books, seem to pour out her pen at the speed of light. Judging by the products, one can only see this prolificity as wrong- headed. While one understands the desire to make hay while the sun shines, one hopes at the same time that the temple's judgment will be equal to his or her ambi- tions. Hutcheon's, unfortunately, is not.

It isn't, you understand, a matter of talent. Her 1980 publication, Narrativity, Narratives, both was, and was perceived as, a promising first book. But that, perhaps, was the whole problem. Taken up most enthusiastically by the very group whose concerns she had earlier ruled irrelevant to the lit-critical task proper ("most dis- cussions of 'postmodernism' are concerned primarily with the psychological, philo- sophical, ideological or social causes of the flourishing self-consciousness of our cul- ture," she writes in Narrativit... N... lute... "This book... makes no presence of con- tributing to... [this debate]... The interest here is rather on the text..."), instead of questioning the rather trite notion that reading of her work, restating or clarifying her terms of reference, Hutcheon allowed the new-found notoriety to go to her head. Dropping her protestations of New Critical purism, she quickly began to play to her unexpected audience, to parrot its pre- ferred intellectual position — in short, to remake herself in trendier terms. The shift of concern from ideas to packaging took a predictable toll on the quality of product. Succeeding years saw a recasting rather than a broadening of her vision. Succeed- ing books (there have been none in this was a trend that became in 1983);

What is perhaps most surprising is the relative lack of innovation. For a discipline that has developed in the last half-decade, her modus has come to de- pend almost completely on recapitulation. She recapitulates herself; she recapitulates other critics; she recapitulates the ideas currently most favoured by popular wis- dom. Why does this bother me? Well, it's unfair to the individuals she ap- propriates, for one thing — and not just for reasons of credit. Having parachuted directly to the leading edge, she is rarely able to avoid distorting what she borrows. It's unfair to the duller but sounder col- leagues with whom she is competing for limited prestige and resources. Most of all, it is unfair to the reader. Here is where the danger comes in. Because the Canadian lit- crit establishment came late to postmodern modes of critique, this self-proclaimed expert has been widely seized upon as a de- pendable guide to the term incautious. Of far more lasting importance than the injus- tice she does to other scholars by her intel-