

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 Eksteins
Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989,
396 pp.

What makes *Rites of Spring* a daring piece of cultural history are the creative ways in which Eksteins tries, 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, an ecstatic Paris in the wake of Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, and the popular reception of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* — Eksteins 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 acceptance that modernism led to a *Götterdämmerung*, where all is terror and destruction. In this conceptualisation, Eksteins misrepresents the broader spirit and tradition of modernism.

Eksteins begins his work, appropriately enough, with the looming imagery of death symbolised by Venice, that ghostly city of imagination and decay, where Richard Wagner, Serge 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 searing message of national renewal and violent sacrifice.

Everything about *The Rite of Spring*, writes Eksteins, suggested newness as well as a considerable German influence. The Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 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." Serge 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. Vaslav 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 dervishes and knock-kneed contortions. With all this concentrated talent and willful 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

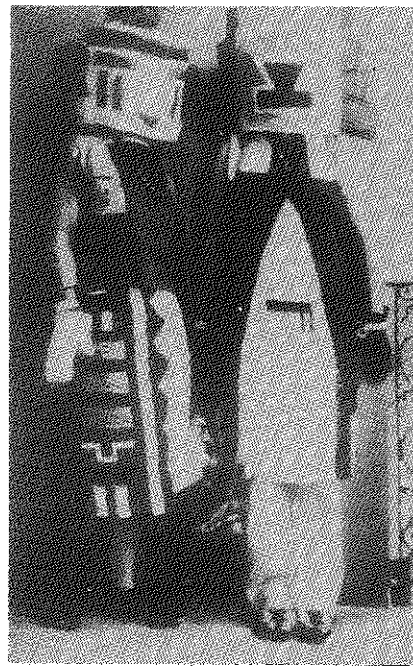
and action, art and reality, and the heightened irrational urge to hurl oneself towards self-annihilation.

On the eve of the war, argues Eksteins, "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 *Ur* forces which

combined primeval instincts with mysticism. The popular distinction the Germans made just prior to the war between *Zivilization* and *Kultur* further exemplified their tendency to go hunting for repressed lusts 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 mood, 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 belated 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 Eksteins 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 luxuriant, unnatural growth."

Eksteins 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, Eksteins 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



Dada dancers



Cubist war. A gas sentry sounds the alarm, near Fleurbaix, June 1916.

accurate to say that the German experience, lacking both the social and political basis for a robust modernism, encouraged the negative strains of the movement.

Modernism can be generally described as a rage against accredited values; it restlessly demands authenticity, and challenges the accepted ways of doing things. It is caught up in the failure to understand itself, yet its impulse towards revolt and renewal is inextricably tied to a bourgeois critical spirit and

political power. In France and England, *épaté 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 injuries of the past that a 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 Eksteins asserts, more advanced than in other European countries, but were simply more prone to replace a critique of bourgeois values with irrational flirtations. It constumarily enshrined and subtly empowered reactionary ideals of *Legensphilosophie*, 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 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 Eksteins book concentrates on how the war was originally perceived by the German, French and English soldiers and the appalling 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.

Eksteins's analysis of the psychological motivations of the major belligerents, on the other hand, reads like a caricature. The Germans "regarded the war as a spiritual conflict," writes Eksteins. The English, in contrast, were motivated by "a spirit of sportsmanship, a sense of fair play, probity and decorum. The war for them was a game." Little understanding is gained by these questionable comparisons. On the surface, some of Eksteins's assertions sound plausible. Because the Germans had been most readily inclined to question the prevailing bourgeois values of the nineteenth

century, he argues, they were in a better position to blatantly change the international standards of behaviour in war. It was they who had initiated the defensive posture of trench warfare, *stellungskrieg*, and were the first to use poison gas in the trenches, to attack cities from the skies with zeppelins, and to use submarine warfare. German innovation is adroitly linked by Eksteins with Germany's modernist spirit. Perhaps it was, but there are other obvious reasons for German tactical surprises. The Germans, like the Allies, had hoped for a quick war. When the Schlieffen plan, which had relied on a lightning attack, stalemated on the western front, the Germans 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 now fighting for survival and took gambles that were motivated less by any modernist dynamics than by sheer desperation.

Eksteins's treatment of the war experience, while a restatement of more conventional interpretations, is more to the point. Those soldiers who participated in the morbid struggle of trench warfare were politicised by the camaraderie they shared. In the trenches class divisions lessened and for a short time a sense of common 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 Eksteins, when German, English and French soldiers took time off from the war to exchange yuletide greetings and gifts. But if the war offered a collective point of reference, it also promoted a new martial spirit. The poet and novelist Ernst Jünger, in an ecstatic exaltation of trench warfare, best expressed this attitude, "War is our father, it has given birth to us in the glowing womb of the trenches as a new race, and we recognise our origins with pride. Thus our values should be heroic values, the values of warriors and not of shopkeepers who want to measure the world with their yardstick." (Quoted in Alistair Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, 1971.)

After the war the reasons for the fighting were quickly suppressed, but consciousness of the war was to re-emerge as an essential "life experience" and was used most effectively by the fascists, first in Italy and later and more forcefully by the Germans. It was not only the fascists who returned to the war experience. Part of the reason why Lindbergh received such a delirious welcome from the Parisian crowd, nine years after the war was over, argues Eksteins, was that he represented a revival of those aspects of war experience that transcended the horrors of the trenches. His was a singular act of heroism and a symbol of America's unrestrained energy. When Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* came out in 1927, a starker aspect of the war memory was highlighted: a fascination for death and destruction. The novel, writes Eksteins, captured the anxiety of a lost generation in the throes of their "romantic agony." The book exposed

the modern impulse to see death as a source of art and vitality, an "apocalyptic post-Christian vision of life, peace, and happiness in death."

The war experience was certainly ambiguous, offering both an apocalyptic impulse and an heroic moment of transcendence. It was also politically decisive. Former combatants were united in an aggressive devotion to the nation, in whose name, after all, they had risked their life. In every nation veterans' organisations tended to become rightist pressure groups. In Germany the nationalist veterans were highly critical of Remarque's book. The Nazis in particular condemned it for its pacifism and its suggestion that the war had been in vain. Accepting such a view was to deny the exhilaration and the necessity of the war and the heroic warrior values to which it gave birth. For many nationalists and veterans, Adolph Hitler, not the author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, best represented the trench years. Hitler, writes Eksteins, "was no Erich Maria Remarque, who extrapolated several months experience into a general account of the war.... He lived the front-line experience from almost the beginning to the end." And in Hitler's own words, the war "was the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly experience."

The reawakening of the anonymous collective strength that had been unleashed by the war was the goal of all German nationalists. Memory of the war and the frustration of defeat were rekindled at the end of the twenties in the wake of the Great Depression. It is perhaps no surprise that Eksteins says practically nothing of the economic collapse of the Weimar Republic, preferring to stay on the rarified plane of ideas. This is a time when the word *Kultur* cropped up again to summon the ideals of German superiority, and of the Nazis march to power. The rise of Nazism too is linked to modernist tendencies to aestheticise politics. In the rituals and propaganda of the Nazis, writes Eksteins, one could detect little substance. It was all style, mood, and "theatre, the vulgar art of the *grand guignol* production of the beer halls and the streets." Here was the monumental execution of politics as art, and as grand spectacle to fill the existential void of the people: a spectacle where death occupied a central place. But, above all, this was an orgiastic expression of kitsch with its irreverent substitution of aesthetics for ethics. Kitsch sensibility, rooted as it is in superficiality, falsity, and plagiarism, served to confuse the already blurry relationship between art and life, reality and myth. In the final analysis, Eksteins intimates, modernism, full of confusion, rebelliousness and irrational desires, released an urge to destroy that would eventually lead to the German death wish and the crematoriums at Birknau.

We thus return to the original premise that Eksteins found in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. What began as an aesthetic urge to rebel and fuse life with art ends in an orgy of destruction. Between the snarling hatred of the Nazi hoodlums and the irrationalism of the death camps falls the

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shadow of the Great War and modernism. This is some sort of answer, but a very incomplete 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 Eksteins does, without grounding the social origins of the movements in different countries, is to invite protean generalisations of little use. From the start German modernism held all the tensions of a conservative 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 resistance, German modernism failed to deal with its underlying contradictions: knowing how to manage its impulse towards the subjective and the irrational without betraying 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 Jürgen Habermas, argues that the emancipatory dimensions of German modernism remained not only unfulfilled but are currently under siege by antimodernist intellectual influences. Habermas has been an outspoken defender of what he calls high modernism against the aesthetic and political 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 Diaghilev's ballet with the bloody experience of the First World War and the aspirations and failures of modernism, but Eksteins's fractured and free-associative approach, which crams the likes of Josephine Baker, Isadora Duncan, Cocteau, Hitler and the music of Wagner into one portmanteau sentence also prevents him from making important critical distinctions. What is absent from his analysis 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 he gives us is a modernist aesthetic that is divorced from the more concrete and arguable instances of politics, economics and social movements. One would have wished that Eksteins 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 tradition'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 "hedonistic" and "irrational" motives that were incompatible with the ordered and reliable values of a traditional world. ■

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Postmodernism and its discontents

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A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction

by Linda Hutcheon

New York: Routledge, 1988, 268 pp.

The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction

by Linda Hutcheon

Toronto: Oxford, 1988, 230 pp.

Whatever else one may say about her, Linda Hutcheon has to be considered 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 bandwagon — she has managed, by dint largely of relabelling, to transform herself into the guru of Canadian postmodernism. And a wordy 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 oeuvre. Essays, articles, lectures, working papers, reviews, colloquia, even entire books, seem to pour off 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 temptee's judgment will be equal to his or her ambitions. Hutcheon's, unfortunately, is not.

It isn't, you understand, a matter of talent. Her 1980 publication, *Narcissistic 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 discussions of 'postmodernism' are concerned primarily with the psychological, philosophical, ideological or social causes of the flourishing self-consciousness of our culture," she writes in *Narcissistic Narratives*. "This book ... makes no pretence of contributing to [this debate] ... The interest

here is rather on the text"), instead of questioning the rather ironical reading-into of her work, reiterating 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 preferred 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. Succeeding books (there have been four in rapid-fire succession since that first) lost in substance what they gained in polish. The more her bibliography swelled, the less attention she gave to the concrete and painstaking explication that informed her earlier writing. Of late, apart from replays, the spadework has been replaced almost entirely by verbal pyrotechnics.

If this judgment seems harsh, it is perhaps only fair that I pause here to declare a bias. The fact is that I believe Hutcheon to be not only a bad scholar but a dangerous one. When I said "parrot" above, I used the term advisedly. Far from simply superficial — which would be grounds for complaint but hardly alarm — Hutcheon's work is derivative in the most profound and far-reaching sense. Increasingly over the last half-decade, her modus has come to depend almost completely on recapitulation. She recapitulates herself; she recapitulates other critics; she recapitulates the ideas currently most favoured by popular wisdom. Why does this bother me? Well, it's unfair to the individuals she appropriates, 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 colleagues 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 dependable guide to the terra incognita. Of far more lasting importance than the injustice she does to other scholars by her intel-

