

**Modernism on the 'Margin' –  
The 'Margin' on Modernism**

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Katalin Kürtösi

**Modernism on the 'Margin' –  
The 'Margin' on Modernism**

Manifestations in Canadian Culture





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## Introduction

This study aims at addressing questions such as “Is there a way to de-center Modernism?” so that their manifestations in a marginal culture can be investigated. Is it possible that marginal cultures have enriched Modernism to such an extent that our present understanding of the phenomenon is modified as a consequence of this process? Can Modernism incorporate works from ‘the margin’ without becoming too vague and indefinite?

In accordance with Linda Hutcheon, I believe that “the impulse to situate is important” (1988: viii): having spent the majority of my adult life in provincial, but culturally lively towns (Kecskemét, Szeged) of a ‘marginal’ culture of Europe (Hungary) which is further separated from the cultures of both its neighbouring countries and the rest of the continent by the uniqueness of the language, the workings of culture and literature under such conditions have long been a preoccupation for me. The painting ‘Homage to Malevich’ by Hungarian painter Béla Kádár on the cover of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* confirmed my suspicion that artists and their works from the ‘margins’ can significantly contribute to our general image of a given trend, in this case to Modernism or the avant-garde. My academic interest has helped draw the boundaries of the present research both geographically (Canada – with some mention of Québec as part in it) and historically (the twentieth century). In the course of the research it has come to the surface that the two ‘peripheries’ (Canada and Hungary) did meet occasionally, as the journals of Emily Carr reveal: not only did she meet Géza de Kresz on several occasions when the Hart House Quartet played in Victoria, but in May 1936 “an artist of Budapest visited me” who “looked at sketches as a nature lover looks at a live wood, seeing the trees and the space between. He looked two and a half hours.” The visitor remarked: “Had I left Victoria this morning I would have got nothing. I do not like Victoria, but now I have got something from these. I have got something. I cannot find words easily” (*HT* 825, 826).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands* in her *Complete Writings* 825, 826. Further references to this part of her *Complete Writings* will be parenthetically indicated as *HT*. Olivér Botár, using an earlier edition of Carr’s work, found the name of ‘Jóska Felier’ as the artist of Budapest but could not identify the painter, mentioning that Carr might have misspelled the Hungarian

The choice of my topic is in line with the most recent critical views, including those of Steven Matthews, who pointed out that “the writers from the ‘provinces’ (whether literally, or in terms of their need to give voice to experience never before expressed) ... in their modernism, have been, and contribute to be, the most dynamic and at the same time stabilizing writers of the twentieth century and up to the present day” (Matthews 2008: 34). After confirming a “renewed interest in modernism’s ‘placedness,’” Anouk Lang also points out that “prior to the mid-2000s, the geographical reach of Anglo-American modernist studies rarely extended beyond the borders of Europe and the United States” (48). This limited scope of interest, however, is being challenged in our days; therefore “an examination of the connections and the discrepancies between modernisms in different locations is a scholarly task worth undertaking,” and a new category (namely “geomodernism”) can be introduced to encourage research on Modernisms that are located at non-central places (Lang 61).

Terry Eagleton’s central example of Modernism is the state of the arts (including drama and theatre) in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland; still, his remarks can also be accepted with regard to a North American part of the British Empire, namely Canada: “Modernism is ... a highly traditional crisis of tradition; and ... it worked particularly well in colonial conditions” (41). In a basic manual on the topic, Peter Childs underlines that around the turn of the millennium “Modernist writing has been questioned and broadened, in terms of both its authors and its poetics” (Childs 2000: 23). A recently published history of Canadian literature boldly claims that early twentieth-century writers submitted “distinctly Canadian contributions to the global movement of international literary modernism. A well-kept secret, this Canadian modernism deserves more critical attention” (Gammel 247). This critical attention is all the more relevant since – as Rao observes – “[t]he new writers of the 1920s and 1930s ... brought the language, form, and content of Canadian literature and criticism up-to-date with other national literatures” (19). Before she started to elaborate on the “Visions of Canadian Modernism,” Ann Martin in 2004 found it necessary to stress that “we are just beginning to address the interpenetration of modernism and the experience of urban modernity” (43). Brian Trehearne, in the afterword to the recently published anthology of English-Canadian poetry he edited on the one hand affirms that “[t]he

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name. He pointed out that Hungarian artists played a very important role in disseminating ‘Bauhaus-Modernism’ in Canada (217).

situation of Canadian modernism within the broader modernist revolution in many of the world's literatures invites continued research today," on the other hand he agrees with A.J.M. Smith "that Canadian art of all media must be understood and judged not only against other Canadian works but against the greatest works of the most powerful cultural traditions in the world" (Trehearne 2010: 442, 443). This study aims to be a contribution in this process of mapping the most important features of Modernism in Canadian works.

Among the widely different approaches to the topic, standpoints will have to be accentuated: first of all, I subscribe to what Esther Trépanier says with regard to her research concerning the early-twentieth-century Jewish painters of Montréal, namely that "[s]exual and ethnic identities, when considered alongside individual differences, particular historical circumstances and diverse artistic influences, lose their metaphysically a priori character" (32). Consequently, an interpretation of Modernism in Canadian culture by a non-Canadian researcher might be in place.

Another important statement concerns the general approach toward Modernism: my findings suggest that the plural of the term – Modernisms – helps conceive it/them in a multifaceted way; many are the theorists who stress this particular nature of the artistic trend under investigation. As Charles Taylor puts it, "The ways of modernism are many" (Taylor 1989: 479). Fredric Jameson speaks about 'various modernisms' as attempts "to recode the ... decoded flux of the realistic, middle-class, secular era" (*Jameson Reader*: 183). Peter Faulkner also mentions the "plural vision (as) one of the central recognitions of Modernism" (13). Huyssen proposes that "modernism as an adversary culture cannot be discussed without introducing the concept of alternative modernities to which the multiple modernisms and their different trajectories remain tied in complex mediated ways," adding that the "politics of alternative modernisms are deeply embedded in colonial and postcolonial contexts" (7, 15). In his sourcebook on Modernism, Steven Matthews finds it necessary to challenge the notion of "a single, monolithic, literary movement which might be called *modernism*" and proposes the plural form as "a more indicative term for the many competing modes and impulses which govern the diverse writings ... from this era of literature" (Matthews 2008:1). With regard to American Modernism, Mark Sanders argues for a "*heterodox modernism*" (quoted in Kalaidjian 7), while Levenson simply mentions "many Modernisms" (7), and Lehan uses the plural of the term for his first chapter. Virágos moves along similar lines in his concise book on Anglo-American Modernism: he

points out that “modernism as a movement” manifests diversity, many styles, a non-monolithic quality; therefore it “was not a single coherent development,” and “there exist a number of distinct modernisms” (155, 156).

A logical outcome of this process should be a “revision of the canon” by including “literary experiment from Europe and beyond” (Matthews 2008:1). In *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, Peter Nicholls, whose approach is considered “more inclusive” (Matthews 2004: 7), devotes a whole chapter to ‘other modernisms.’ For Peter Childs, Modernism was “both a provincial phenomenon ... and a global one in which migrants, exiles and émigrés brought difference to bear on and militate against literary dominants” (Childs 2007: 2). Taking the history of the bicycle in Canada as typical embodiment of the advent of the modern in Canada, Glen Norcliffe insists that “[t]here is ... a competing conception of modernity that, by being situated and contextualized in particular settings of time and place, amounts not to one totalizing explanation, but to a cacophony of variations on the theme of modernity” (10).

The relationship between painting and writing will receive particular attention – one reason being that several thorough analyses of Modernism(s) highlight the undeniably tight connection between these two types of artistic expression. Steven Matthews states that “the visual art of the day was hugely influential” (Matthews 2008: 224), and Walter Adamson emphasizes that “the visual arts enjoyed particular prominence in modernist discourse and practice” (2). Daniel Schwarz devotes a whole book to *Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature*, as the subtitle says. Serge Fauchereau highlights the close links and mutual influences between different forms of art in *Avant-gardes du XXe siècle: Arts et littérature 1905–1930*. Northrop Frye, talking about *The Modern Century* (1967), concludes that “It is not always realized how closely analogous the developments of modern literature are to those in the visual arts” (53). Lewis finds it important to stress that “modernism in literature went hand in hand with modern art,” in accordance with Charles Taylor who also emphasizes the parallels, stating that “Modern poetry ... has strong analogies to contemporary non-representative visual art” (Taylor 1989: 477). Hugh Kenner firmly states that “everything innovative in our century was a response to something outside of literature” (Kenner 1983: 374). Scholes (xii) shares these views when his starting point is that “[t]he critical vocabulary of Modernism began with the visual arts, and was ... adopted by literary artists and critics.” Lehan’s insights into this aspect are also worth

considering: “Modernism owed much to the visual and other arts. ... Picasso and Joyce made use of the archeological – layers of narrative or spatial meaning superimposed on each other that collapse both time and space in a totally revolutionary way” (16). Looking at the creative periods of several Modernist artists, we can observe that painters often had a significant literary output (Emily Carr, Bertram Brooker), while some writers, too, were active in painting (D.H. Lawrence, Sinclair Ross).

At the same time, we cannot deny that contrary views also exist, like Peter Faulkner’s standpoint, namely that “[i]t is in poetry and the novel that Modernism can first be most clearly discerned” (21). Faulkner is one of several theorists to disregard not only completely Modernism in fine arts, but also in drama and theatre; Scott Barbour edited a volume about *American Modernism* without even mentioning that Modernism – particularly expressionism – did have a lasting impact on drama and theatre in America (O’Neill, Wilder).

The ‘gardener’ of the following text enjoyed digging deep, evening out the surface and planting, watering – but also had to do a lot of pruning for the sake of consistency in argumentation: each discarded branch caused some pain. My aim in this study is to present a multi-coloured picture about the various aspects of Modernism as practiced and commented upon in Canada. There are perspectives, however, that I will disregard to keep the argumentation concentrated. Most of these perspectives have been elaborated on in other critical and theoretical works; therefore, the following chapters will not cover features such as gender, race, or sexual preference; nor will they go into detailed analysis of the colonial/post-colonial relevances or offer remarks on the technique of the paintings or the rhetorical-stylistic elements of literary works. My argumentation is based predominantly on English-language references, with occasional mention of relevant French background reading – the main reason being the nuances of terminology. This choice is also grounded on a selection of case-study illustrations that will come from English-language modernist writing in Canada.