EN5315 Modernist Special Topics

Topic 1: The Avant-Garde and the Political: Experimental Prose Fiction of the 1930s

Term 2 (Spring); first five classes (weeks 17-21).

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This short course aims to be an advanced introduction to a selection of experimental prose fiction of the 1930s, either British or published in Britain. The 1930s are associated with the Depression Era (following on from the Wall Street Crash in October 1929) and the rise of totalitarian politics in Europe (i.e. Fascism, Nazism, Stalinism), leading together to the cataclysm of World War II. It also saw, inter alia, the rise of The Talkies, the establishment in Britain of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, explorations in nuclear and biological sciences and televisual technology, and the application of Keynesian economics. Anglophone fiction (and poetry also - but we will focus on fiction) was working through the legacies of what has come to be known as 'high modernism', associated with works in the 1920s by Joyce, Woolf, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Lewis. By seeming to resist dogma in all its forms, it purportedly built on this legacy. But it also wrote away from these writings: the period is often associated with a turn away from the solipsism and subjectivity of 'high modernism' and a turn towards social realism, documentary forms, and political commitment (most frequently, Marxism). This course will trouble that binary by looking at how the experimental strain in fiction continued in the 30s in a variety of ways. We will interrogate the very word 'experiment' (a journal called 'Experiment' in Cambridge was begun in 1928). And we will explore how far fiction's explorations of subjectivity and history combined with political critique; and how far it engaged with or flew from the contemporary. We will explore five novels of the period and a selection of contexts in other cultural forms: criticism, poetry, film, and photography.

Course Preparation: Make sure you acquire and read the five main texts before the course begins in January 2015. None is very long, but they are all unconventional, dense, reticular, discursive, digressive. They also reward close attention and rereading. The five texts are:

2. Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* [1936] (London: Virago, 1999) [out of print, so try Amazon and/or Abebooks]

NB: these five texts are fixed. The contextual and critical material in the schedule is at present, however, only suggested and not all equally essential. Before the course begins, this material is likely to expand and the emphasis in the topics for each session may fall differently. A more fixed set of contextual work will appear in good time (before the New Year) on Moodle. As said, the key preparation is to be familiar with the five main texts.
**Teaching:** weekly-two hour seminar, in which there will be student papers some weeks.

**Assessment:** One essay of 2,500–3000 words. Students will be given feedback in one-to-one tutorials on the essays. Students will devise their own question but will need to discuss it with the course convenor before they begin.

By the end of the course, students should:

- have specific knowledge about a range of key texts and contexts relating to fiction of the 1930s;
- have a knowledge and a critical understanding of theoretical debates about experimental writing

**Course Schedule**

**CLASS 1:** (week 17)

**Main text:** Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931)

**Topics:** the 1930s, ‘experiment’, relations between the avant-garde and the political. Empire, elegy and ego.

**Critical contexts**

1. Woolf’s Life, Letters and *A Writer’s Diary*. Hermione Lee’s is the standard biography, but Julia Briggs’ work is excellent. The Diaries and the fiction are extensions of each other and well worth dipping into.
2. Oswald Blakeston’s short film ‘Light Rhythms’. This provides a ‘transmedial’ context.
4. Freud ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’ (Jonathan Cape, 1930)
5. Harold Nicholson ‘Modernist Writers’ (in *The Listener*, 1931) [I will provide pdfs of this material].

**CLASS 2:** (week 18)

Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* [1936]

**Topics:** form and the conditions of cultural production. Weakness and resistance. Intertextuality and digression. I will be asking you to annotate a five page section of this novel.

**Suggested critical contexts**

1. ‘Penelope’ in *Ulysses* [for ‘streams of consciousness’]
2. Stevie Smith, *A Good Time was Had By All* (1937) [her poetry]
4. George Orwell, ‘Boys Weeklies’ in ‘Horizon’, 1940 [to think about cultural production of class and gender ideologies especially in middle-brow magazines]
5. Sickert’s ‘Ennui’ [alluded to in the novel – an example of intertextuality and ekphrasis]
6. Sternlicht, Sanford, *In Search of Stevie Smith* (Syracuse, 1991) [fine collection of essays]
7. Dip into the prose of Gertrude Stein and short stories of Dorothy Parker for stylistic chimes.

CLASS 3: (week 19)

Djuna Barnes, Nightwood [1936].
Topics: queerness, Gothic and Baroque, decadence, talking cures: the end of Empire and racial conflict.

2. Deborah Parsons, Djuna Barnes (Northcote House, 2003)
5. Caselli, Daniella Improper Modernism (Ashgate, 2009)

CLASS 4: (week 20)

James Joyce, 'How Buckley Shot the Russian General' in Finnegans Wake (II.3) [also in transition, 1938]
Topics: forms of history as narrative; assassination; terrorism; Stalinism; new media and propaganda.

1. Walter Benjamin ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ [1940]
3. Finn Fordham, ‘Early Television and Flawed Power’ in Broadcasting in the Modernist Era (Bloomsbury, 2014). [I will provide a pdf of this]
4. ---, Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake, Part II.
5. Eisenstein ‘Battleship Potemkin’ and writings on montage.
6. transition for 1938 [I will provide a pdf of this]

CLASS 5: (week 21)

Henry Green, Party Going [1939].
Topics: Class and the 'bright young things'; threat and stasis.

1. Bill Brandt [photographer] ‘The Thirties’
2. Evelyn Waugh, Vile Bodies (Chapman and Hall, 1930)
3. May 12th – Mass Observation
5. Jeremy Treglown, Romancing: the Life and Work of Henry Green
6. Michael North, Henry Green and the Writing of His Generation
Bibliography

As well as the books and articles listed above, please take note of the following

The Thirties
Baxendale, John Narrating the Thirties: a Decade in the Making (Macmillan, 1996)
Bergonzi, Bernard Reading the Thirties (Macmillan, 1978)
Branson, Noreen Britain in the Nineteen Thirties (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971)
Cunningam, Valentine British Writers of the Thirties (OUP, 1988)
Johnstone, Richard Hard to believe: novelist of the nineteen-thirties (OUP, 1982)
Maroula, Joanna Women Writers of the Thirties
Muggeridge, Malcolm The Thirties: 1930-1940 in Great Britain (1940)1989
Quinn, Patrick Recharting the Thirties (Susquehanna UP, 1996)
Stevenson, Randall The British novel since the Thirties (Batsford, 1986)
Symons, Julian The Thirties: a dream revolved
Williams, Keith and Steven Matthews Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After (Longman: 1997)

Other Fiction/ Prose of The Thirties
Anand, Mulk Raj Untouchable (1935)
Beckett, Samuel Murphy (1938)
Chandler, Raymond The Big Sleep (1939)
Connolly, Cyril Enemies of Promise (1938)
Durrell, Lawrence The Black Book (1938)
Graves, Robert I, Claudius (1935)
Green, Graham A Gun for Sale (1936)
--- Brighton Rock (1938)
Hemingway, Ernest For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)
Huxley, Aldous Brave New World (1932)
--- Eyeless in Gaza (1936)
--- After Many a Summer (1939)
Isherwood, Christopher Mr Norris Changes Trains,
--- Goodbye to Berlin
Jameson, Margaret Storm Women Against Men (1933)
Jones, David In Parenthesis (1937)
Lehmann, Rosamond Dusty Answer
Maugham, Willie Somerset Cakes and Ale (1930)
Mitchison, Naomi The Corn King and the Spring Queen (1931)
--- We have been warned (1935)
--- The Blood of the Martyrs (1939)
Miller, Henry Tropic of Cancer (1934)
--- Tropic of Capricorn (1939)
O’Brien, Flann At-Swim-Two-Birds (1939)
Orwell, George Down and Out in Paris and London (1933)
--- Burmese Days (1934)
--- Homage to Catalonia (1938)
Rao, Raja Kanthapura (1939)
Read, Herbert The Green Child (1935)
Richardson, Dorothy Dawn’s Left Hand (1931)
--- Clear Horizon (1938)
Waugh, Evelyn, Black Mischief (1932)
--- A Handful of Dust (1934)
--- Scoop (1938)
Wells, H.G. The Shape of Things to Come (1933)
--- Star Begotten (1937)
Wodehouse, P.G. Thank you, Jeeves (1934)
--- Blandings Castle (1935)
Woolf, Virginia The Common Reader (1932)
--- The Years (1937)
--- Three Guineas (1938)
--- Between the Acts (1941)

Poetry of the Thirties
Auden, W.H. Poems (1934)
--- Look, Stranger! (1936)
--- and Louis MacNeice Letters from Iceland
Barker, George
Gascoyne, David A Short Survey of Surrealism
--- Man’s Life is This Meat (1936)
Eliot, T.S. Burnt Norton (1936)
--- Collected Poems (1936)
--- Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats (1939)
MacNeice, Louis Autumn Journal (1938)
Spender, Stephen Poems (1933)
--- The Still Centre
Thomas, Dylan Twenty-Five Poems (1935)
--- Map of Love (1939)
Yeats, W.B. A The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933)
--- Vision (1937)
--- Autobiography (1938)

Writers of Detective Fiction and Thrillers
Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler. See also Alfred Hitchcock.

Documentary Film
Harry Watt, Basil Wright, John Grierson, and Stuart Legg.

Drama
J.B. Priestley, Noel Coward, The Group Theatre, Sean O’Casey

Little Magazines

Painters and Sculptors
Edward Burra, Barbara Hepworth, Augustus John, Gwen John, Wyndham Lewis, Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Stanley Spencer, Graham Sutherland, Francis Bacon (only just).
Modernist Special Topic 2: Postcolonial Modernisms: Crises and Experiments in the African Novel

(Term 2, weeks 23-27)

Course Tutor: Dr. Mark Mathuray
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Scope:

This modernist special topic seeks to explore the re-appropriation and re-tooling of modernist aesthetic strategies by a range of contemporary African writers to address the crises of the postcolonial state and subjectivity. We will trace the various genealogies of African literary modernism. Some writers, like Soyinka and Marechera, draw quite deliberately from the Euro-modernist tradition and others, like Head, seek inspiration from across the Atlantic in the Harlem Renaissance. The novels we will engage with are often thought of as belonging to the period of High African modernist fiction. Texts, published during this period, are balanced precariously between the literature of national restoration, when artists allied themselves with the process of nation-building, of creatively imagining the nation into being, and the literature of social critique which was dominated by class analyses of postcolonial African society. Caught in this in-between space, African high modernism augurs the rupture between the nation-state and artistic endeavour.

Learning Outcomes: After taking the course, students will have

- Engaged critically with a range of African modernist novels.
- Developed a detailed knowledge and understanding of the histories, politics, theoretical concepts and experimental strategies engaged by the texts under discussion.
- Worked with different postcolonial theoretical approaches and critical strategies and relate them to literary texts.
- Developed a clear understanding of the various genealogies of the African modernist novel.
- Explored the legacy of African High modernism on contemporary African writers.

Teaching & Learning Methods:

There will be a two-hour seminar for 5 weeks.

Summative Assessment (100%) and Feedback

One essay of 2,500 – 3000 words. Students will be given feedback in one-to-one tutorials on the essays. Students will devise their own topics but will need to discuss it with the course convenor before they begin.
Course Outline

Week 23. Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

Week 24. Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

Week 25. Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

Week 26. Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger*

Week 27. Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames*

Key Bibliography


   http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modernism-modernity/v013/13.3friedman.html


5. Marechera, Dambudzo. The African Writer’s Experience of European literature :

   http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/African%20Journals/pdfs/Journal%20of%20the%20University%20of%20Zimbabwe/vol14n2/juz014002003.pdf