

BOOK REVIEW

Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art. *Jessica Burstein*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. Pp. ix+321.

Jessica Burstein's *Cold Modernism* is an important book that makes us look again at some of the more unassimilable figures of modernism. Her critical voice is erudite, quirky (in the best possible way), and (above all) enthusiastic about its subjects, and her book presents a wealth of careful close reading of a diversity of texts and artifacts. Burstein's study is premised on the idea of "cold modernism," a modernism that "engages a world without selves or psychology," an "ahumanism" rather than antihumanism (2). Burstein freely admits that she is not "alone" in her use of "the thermometric as a gauge" for modernism (she offers three "Germanists"—Helmut Lethen, Gabriele Mentges, and Anton Kaes—as other scholars using the "topos of the chilly" [29]) but is firm in her sense that the particular "viewing machine" that her book utilizes is both unique and useful (30).

Cold Modernism focuses on five creative practitioners—Wyndham Lewis, Mina Loy, Coco Chanel, Hans Bellmer, and Balthus—people you "wouldn't necessarily recognize," because they have been, in different ways, "overlooked" in modernist studies (3). By bringing together these disparate figures, Burstein aims to explore "the intellectual congress between artists of different countries and media" while retaining what she claims is her focus on "aesthetic current[s] in Anglo-American modernism" (11). There is a tension in this claim, not least because most of her five figures are just as oriented toward the European avant-garde as they are fixed on the Anglo-American axis. Nevertheless, Burstein's introductory discussion of modernist studies (though she herself does not actually use this current terminology) is a very useful take on the contemporary state of play in the discipline.

There could certainly be some dispute with the figures Burstein has chosen to explore in *Cold Modernism* and the way she chooses to characterize

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them. The introduction (“Nothing Personal”), for example, discusses Virginia Woolf but fails to engage with recent critical studies of cinema and modernism that offer the most convincing account of how Woolf conceived of the “world without a self.” The conclusions drawn in David Trotter’s *Cinema and Modernism* (2007) and Laura Marcus’s *The Tenth Muse* (2010) about Woolf’s exploration of the camera eye and its seeing-without-self would actually put her much closer to the “cold modernism” described in Burstein’s book and would contradict her assertion that Woolf is “irrevocably a hot modernist” (28). There are other details I would dispute: it is very difficult to read Loy’s “‘The Starry Sky’ of Wyndham Lewis” as anything other than a critique, and certainly not as the “laudatory poem” that Burstein describes (30). Burstein is, overall, very good at presenting a sophisticated analytical and theoretical frame and unearthing some intriguing material—“the connection between modernism and the modern field of entomology” (93), for example—but she seems somewhat shy of consistently engaging with current scholarship on the five figures she has chosen to characterize as cold modernists.

Burstein begins with nuanced and detailed readings of Wyndham Lewis, across two chapters, which challenge some of the bland assumptions about him and his work. Exploring the double in *Tarr* and *Mrs. Duker’s Million* (in chap. 1) and the prosthetic in *Snooty Baronet* and *Hitler* (in chap. 2), Burstein proposes both that the “concept of a fascist aesthetic is itself a fiction” (67) and that Lewis’s prosthetic is not a “corrective” but “something that makes available new options[,] . . . issues in novel potentialities” (85). Her book’s first “Interregnum” considers Bellmer’s doll, identifying “an account of the body in which the mind plays little or no role” in this work (97). Confronting the conventional trope of reading Bellmer through psychoanalysis (which informs so many readings, even those that aren’t psychoanalytic), Burstein explores instead the “visual syntax” of the doll (102), recasting her earlier syntactical examination of Lewis and presenting Bellmer’s early work as a “double for cold modernist art” (98). Tantalizing here and in the discussion on Lewis, but never fully explored, is Burstein’s observation that “female bodies . . . even once revealed as prosthetic refuse to resolve” (96).

Burstein goes on to focus on ideas of “invention, originality, and reproducibility” that concern both Chanel and Loy (139), offering, in chapter 3, an account of the birth of the “little black dress.” Although Burstein claims Chanel “serves as a prototype for cold modernism” (150) and offers some biographical information on Chanel and some interesting readings of *Vogue*, the chapter does not really advance the author’s central thesis or convince the reader of the significance of using Chanel as one of the five figures of cold modernism. Chapter 4, “Loy, Inc.”—which explores the “domestica” (the crossing of “household elements” and “rigid eroticism” [152]) and the “soft-machines” (196) in Loy’s poetry, designs, and inventions—is

both fascinating and disappointing. For Burstein, Loy is “one of the more peculiar practitioners of cold modernism,” and her discussion explores in detail Loy’s early poem “Virgins plus Curtain minus Dots,” contextualizing it through the history of the corset and its appearance in *Rogue* magazine. Burstein then goes on to explore Loy’s proposals and designs for prosthetic, ergonomic, and body-modification devices and concludes that “the clinicism of her prosody finds new form in the soft machinery of her inventions” (196). Burstein’s reading is detailed and culturally rich, but it makes no attempt to engage with Suzanne Churchill’s work on *Rogue* magazine and Loy, or with Tim Armstrong’s work on Loy’s ideas about body modification (especially Loy’s “Auto-Facial-Construction”), or with any more recent work on Loy, which makes the analysis here seem peculiarly detached from contemporary critical debates around Loy’s work.

The book’s second “Interregnum” explores, in very close detail, the “mistakes” in Balthus’s *La Patience* (210) in order to demonstrate that this painting is not about what it seems to be about—that we mistakenly assume that it signals interiority, when it actually shows us “varieties of emptiness” (205). Burstein asserts that although *La Patience* is not an “exemplar of cold modernism,” it does enact “one of the recurrent themes of cold modernism . . . by which insides are abjured in favor of outsides” (202). While her reading is both subtle and intense, the focus on the specific aesthetic currents of cold modernism wanes at this point.

Burstein goes on, in her epilogue (“Imitation and Its Discontents”), to consider “cold modernism” and postmodernism and offers a reading of Henry James’s short story “The Real Thing.” I remain unconvinced of the utility, yet again, in illustrating that the divide between modernism and postmodernism is factitious. The more interesting conclusion here concerns “imitation” as the “most valuable” (248) and “privileged term” for cold modernism (257) because it “dispenses with both death and life” and thus “emerges as fully alien” (257), remaining both “immune” (257) and “impervious” (258).

I enjoyed this book, a real enjoyment that stems from Burstein’s voice and style, her accomplished handling of ideas, and the surprising details in her contextual and critical framework. I would disagree with some of the assumptions that she makes and would want to modulate some of her conclusions, but I would, nevertheless, characterize *Cold Modernism* as a notable contribution to modernist studies.

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