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Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art (Refiguring Modernism)

By Jessica Burstein



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In *Cold Modernism*, Jessica Burstein explores various cultural facets of modernism, tying them into a fresh conceptual framework. Central to her analysis is the important premise that our current understanding of modernism is fundamentally incomplete. Reacting against “hot,” libidinous, and psychology-centered modernism, Burstein asserts that “a constellation of modernist sensibility” has been left unacknowledged, one that laid the essential groundwork for postmodernism.

In her wide-ranging discussion of fiction, poetry, art, and fashion, Burstein sets up the parameters of what she calls “cold modernism.” According to Burstein, cold modernism operates on the premise that “there is a world in which the mind does not exist, let alone matter”; it runs counter to the “tropical bodies” of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. Basing the core of her analysis on the written works of Wyndham Lewis, Burstein views varying disciplines within modernism through the lens of their human interest, focusing on the “coldest”: works that convey the mechanical and inhuman. In these works, she contends, the role of the self is nonexistent, and the individual mind is merely a physical fact.

Cold Modernism raises questions fundamental to the understanding of modernist and postmodernist written and visual culture and is destined to become essential reading in the field.



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Editorial Review

Review

“*Cold Modernism* is a wonderful book—insightful, erudite, and witty beyond words. I think it will have an enormous impact on modernist studies.”

—Douglas Mao, Johns Hopkins University

“Readers who possess a passing familiarity with these artists, their personalities, and their artistic expression—which often ran uncomfortably but purposely against orthodox modernism—will realize the challenge undertaken by this author. With 52 pages of endnotes and bibliography, the effort certainly can be considered erudite.”

—W. S. Bradley, *Choice*

“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.”

—Alex Goody, *Modern Philology*

“At its considerable best, Burstein’s book makes a major claim on our attention as a lunar Baedeker to the dark side of modernism. It is a tightly argued and original case for considering literature, fine art, and manufactured objects together, and it helps one to understand how ahumanism might reflect the relationship between consciousness and individuality on one hand and the very idea of humanism on the other. Burstein’s book should help bring her obdurately ahuman aesthetic and commercial subjects to further critical attention. It may seem paradoxical to say this, but never mind: however chilly, artificial, and (in the best sense) superficial its subject matter, *Cold Modernism* deserves a warm welcome.”

—Scott W. Klein, *Modernism/Modernity*

About the Author

Jessica Burstein is Associate Professor of English at the University of Washington.

Users Review

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Colleen Thompson:

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