

Technology and Modernity

Panel Co-organized and co-chaired by Irene Gammel and John Wrighton
Modernist Studies Association, MSA XIII
SUNY Buffalo, October 6-9

Robert Hemmings (Nipissing-Muskoka), “Bicycles, Wheels and Technological Innovation in Wells and Duchamp”

Vanessa Chang (Stanford University), “The Circus Body and the Metronome of Taylorism”

Robert Morden (York, Toronto), “Repetition as Material Insistence: Radicalization of Technology in Gertrude Stein”

Panel Abstract:

Investigating what historian of technology Tomas Misa has called the “co-construction of technology and modernity,” this panel investigates the material use of emergent technologies in individual modernist and avant-garde aesthetic practices. Central to these investigations is how such cultural work has been formative in our notions of the fashioning of the modern(ist) self and community. Affirming the obsolescence of the “prosthesis model” of “technological instrumentalism,” Sara Danius’ *The Senses of Modernism* (2002) has demonstrated how technology is internalised within our perceptual apparatus. By further complicating and nuancing opposing models of technological determinism and constructivism, the papers in this panel examine the co-construction of technology and modernity in spaces not typically looked at in this context, such as, the domestic, the circus, and quotidian language.

By using Bill Brown’s notion of “effecting thingness,” Robert Hemmings’ paper explores bicycles, wheels and technological innovations in H.D. Wells and Marcel Duchamp. Thus he reads the symbolic function of the bicycle as an object embodying a material force that shapes and constructs the subjects who use them. Nearly one hundred years after its unveiling, viewers may regard the wheel of Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) as a relatively benign, almost quaint object to deploy in his first “assisted readymade,” but this remarkable artwork compresses the cultural meanings of the object at work in H.D. Wells’ early novels, *Wheels of Chance: A Bicycling Idyll* (1896) and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910). The bicycle is used in Wells’s novel as an object that creates, or enhances, and destroys, or threatens to destroy, categories of subjectivity along class and gender lines. Thus Duchamp’s bicycle wheel invokes in plainer terms what is already latent in Wells: the innovation of proto-cyborgian modern subjectivity.

Also in the early twentieth century, in another kind of spectacle, the trope of the circus body offered nascent media forms a somatic vocabulary for staging utopian critiques of modern identity under industrialisation. Using Foucaultian theories of biopower, Vanessa Chang’s paper reads the circus body as a site of micropolitical struggle but also as a panacea for the disciplined modern subject, whose mechanized body was inscribed by the inexorable metronome of Taylorism. Through a transmedia comparison of circus bodies and those populating animated film at the beginning of the century, Chang constructs a shared history of a spectacular alternative body, one which defies and transgresses its normal limits.

Finally, the radicalization of technology in the poetic practice of Gertrude Stein is examined by Robert Morden, both in terms of Stein’s materials (quotidian language) and technique (mechanical repetition). Stein’s aesthetic does not capitulate to or embrace capitalist industry; instead, Morden argues, we should read the significance of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1913) in terms of Theodor Adorno’s notion that modernist art employs technological means to contest

and resist technological modernity. Repetition (the agent of abstraction) in Stein's work functions to dissociate the word from its syntactic and representational ends in order to foreground the sensuous dimension immanent to the word itself (word as image and sound)

Conference Location: Buffalo, NY, USA

Conference Starts: October 06, 2011

Conference Ends: October 09, 2011

For more information, contact: Irene Gammel or John Wrighton

Modernist Studies Association: http://msa.press.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/cfp_view.cgi#