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"the despised, adorable joyous modern way,"[1]
or The 'Diverse' (?) Modernism of Canadian Artists

Abstract

Traditionally, the critical discourse about Modernism focuses on its central locations and leading artists. Later research, however, stresses the plural nature of this highly experimenting trend, underlining the importance of the contribution of colonial cultures. The paper investigates the general and particular Modernist features in works by artists active in Canada in the interwar period.

Résumé

Traditionnellement, le discours critique s'est occupé davantage des Centres et des artistes de grande renommée internationale. Or, plus récemment, la recherche s'interroge sur la nature plurielle des tendances d'expérimentation, en soulignant l'importance des cultures coloniales. L'article envisage l'analyse des caractéristiques, aussi bien générales que particulieres, des artistes Canadiens, déployant leur activité dans le cadre du Modernisme pendant la période de l'entre-deux-guerres.

"The young look ahead.
The old look back.
Neither see much."
Lawren Harris, "People Are All Right"

Terminology

Modernism in Canada can be viewed not as an 'exotic' case, but as a Modernism in its own right, with some elements shared with 'universal' Modernism and others pointing to their embeddedness in local or regional culture. The term covers widely different artistic attitudes and methods: these are reflected in the definition by Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane in their *Pelican Guide to Modernism*.

> Modernism was in most countries an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the

1) Carr, Emily. "Autobiography." Crean 205.

> classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old régimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear ... (46)

In recent theoretical discourse the need for revisiting the issue of Modernism is clearly manifest – one newly highlighted element being the use of the term in the plural. This approach results in the inclusion of hitherto neglected cultures and artists in the newly shaping canon of the trend. In my view, this is not an 'alternative' canon of lesser-known works, but a more shaded – and therefore more accurate – picture about a particularly complex process in the history of Western culture. "Modernism has predominantly been represented in white, male, heterosexist, Euroamerican middle-class terms, and any of the recent challenges to each of these aspects introduces another one of a plurality of Modernisms," as Peter Childs asserts (***Modernism*** 12). The same scholar, seven years later, describes modernism as "a mulatto movement of hybrid texts and mongrel selves" (Childs, ***Modernism and...*** 20) referring to the Modernist practices of crossing generic and cultural borders. In his seminal book on ***The Politics of Modernism***, Raymond Williams also argues for the need to challenge the hegemony of the fixed canon (35) – a quarter of a century later, Matthews can already conclude that "[t]he modernist 'canon' is frequently being added to" (***Modernism*** 13). Statements like the need for a "new disposition toward the uneven, geo-historical distribution of modernisms" (Brooker and Thacker 3), or for "de-Westerniz(ing) notions such as modernity and modernism" (Huyssen 13), including "a variety of literary modes and styles, often radically different from each other" (Matthews, ***Modernism*** 7) and the refusal of hierarchies among cultures reflect the newly emerging standpoints. Huyssen points out that "[c]ultural hierarchy is a key issue for alternative modernisms, which are inevitably shaped by the power relations between the metropolis and the periphery" (14). Similar views are exposed by Armstrong in his recently published book on the cultural history of Modernism: "[t]o consider modernism is ... to engage with culture defined in terms of an interconnected field of activity in which hierarchy and even causality is problematic ... it is also to deal with the notion of modernity as a series of epistemic shifts in systematic regimes of knowledge, communication and perception" (ix). Bernard Bergonzi – despite being a leading T. S. Eliot scholar – did not hesitate to demand an open approach to the question: "[t]he dominance of a limited canon of unquestionably great authors is to be resisted, since it implies that non-canonical authors are not worth spending time on. It is best resisted ... by discovering, reading, discussing, and making available other texts which may be excellent and interesting" (xiv). Fauchereau uses the forest as a symbol for this complex phenomenon in Western cultural history, pointing out that the forest is composed not only of straight, big trees, but also of some others which are deemed to be cut down, new ones are planted and the undergrowth[2] is also important.

2) The same image is used by Emily Carr with regard to her own work: when six pictures of hers were refused by the National Gallery in Ottawa without comment, her decision was to "heap the pictures back in their room, not ashamed, regarding them as the under-crop that is to prepare the soil for a finer one – dig them in for manure. Don't sit weeping over your poor little manure pile, but spread it and sow a new crop on top and the next one will surely be richer for it." (January 16th, [1934], *HT*, 720)

> Une mise en ordre trop dogmatique ferai ... de la forêt une sorte de jardin à la française, clair, net mais fige et solitaire. Or l`art est multiple et changeant ... l`histoire des arts et de la littérature est perpetuellement soignée et corrigée par le present. Ses valeurs, ses classifications et, donc, sa comprehension sont à reviser regulièrement. ... il y a de interactions internationales entre les arts et même entre les avant-gardes rivales. En fait, aucun mouvement n'est pas aussi independant qu'il le pretend de ce qui l'entoure ou le précéde. (Fauchereau 14)

Concerning the time-frame, for practical reasons, we will choose Canadian examples from the first half of the twentieth century, taking into consideration that, like elsewhere in the world, the interwar years can be considered its peak period.

Features of Modernism

To facilitate the choice of these examples, it can be of use to enumerate some main features of Modernism. Modernist artists in general like to emphasize their refusal of the immediate past, particularly the 'realist' approach to artistic representation (painting, fiction, drama) and they move in the direction of abstraction, fragmentation, self-representation and self-reflection – a process called the 'inward turn' by Charles Taylor. These artists wish to re-arrange the relationship between artist, work, and receiver: very often, their ideal is to create a work which is difficult to understand; therefore, a limited number of sensitive readers/audience is their target. Their work manifests experimentation, and originality is highly valued among them.

What are the icons of Modernism? Various forms of art establish certain elements that re-call the idea of Modernism in the audience. In contrast with the celebration of nature in Romanticism (be it music, painting or fiction, and poetry), the favourite scene of Modernist works is the town or the city, with the crowds (made up of alienated individuals), noises (industrial, or those of traffic), vehicles, accelerated time. The city accommodates thousands of strangers, arriving from the peripheries of the same culture, or from other cultures, even from other continents. The opposite of the city, its crowd and 'sophistication' is also represented in Modernist art: the cult of the 'primitive' seems to complement the celebration of the city – and can be directly linked with the changed focus on man's inner life, the subconscious, the taboos. The icons of modernism can be classified as tools of transportation, communication, or technical advancement (bicycle, car, aeroplane, telegram, telephone), as new features of living conditions (city, exile, crowd, alienation), or as an outlook to unknown lands, cultures (primitivism). New tools of artistic expression (like photography, film) also become iconic of Modernism. Changes in personal habits enrich the list: public cigarette smoking, advertisements, shopping mass produced goods.

The turn towards the primitive involves the introduction of 'primitive people' as characters, subject matters of Modernist art – consequently, the 'other' becomes a protagonist in these works, thus demolishing the notion of a 'homogeneous European culture' (Schwartz 5). Childs points out that this turn is "fundamental to the search for a new aesthetic in modernism" (Childs, *Modernism and*... 22). It does not necessarily involve 'exotic' locations or cultures, but

can be revealed in D.H. Lawrence's and Faulkner's fiction as well as in Emily Carr's paintings and stories. We can agree with Matthews that "the impact of the empire upon form and representation in this period" becomes highly visible (*Modernism: A Sourcebook* 224). Ulf Hannerz underlines the dichotomies of the process: "[t]he Third World is in the First World, and the First World in the Third; the North is in the South, and the South in the North; the center is in the periphery, and the periphery is in the center" (qtd. in Tambiah 190).

Modernism in Canadian culture

The illustrations taken from various art forms focus on the presence of the 'primitive,' on cityscapes and on industrial 'landscapes.' Representing 'simple people' was markedly present in Romantic poetry all over Europe, so the interest of late 19th-century artists in Canada in native people and their culture can be linked with this preference of Romantic art as well as the new focus on 'primitive' (often 'exotic') people. As is widely known among Canadianists, Confederation poet Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947) often chose First Nations topics for his work, very often featuring native women. "The Onondaga Madonna" (1894) or "Watkwenies" (1898) are perhaps the best-known: the first one speaks about "a weird and waning race," while the latter underlines that the valiant times are long over. The last years of the nineteenth century were the starting point of another artist who from the very beginning consciously mapped and depicted the life and art – she herself called it 'art' – of British Columbia native tribes. Emily Carr (1871–1945) "felt a bond with these people, whose culture was so distinct from that of the immigrant population" (Newlands 12). Her first sketches are still in the traditional vein. Twelve years later, however – after studying in London and Paris for several years – she applied the new style of the French Fauves and cubist painters to represent this quickly decaying culture. In contrast with the most celebrated French painters (Matisse and Picasso), Carr spent months and months among aboriginal people. "During the summer of 1912, Emily Carr was able to visit more than 15 native villages along the B. C. Coast. Some were deserted, while others were still inhabited" (Newlands 24). She took the advice of Harry Gibb, her master in Paris, who could recognize Carr's individual talent already in 1910 – as she remembers in her journal, he told her that "Your silent Indian will teach you more than all the art jargon" (*GP* 432). In Carr's eyes, the totem poles were works of art, telling the myths of the tribe. She was convinced that "[t]he totem figures represented supernatural as well as natural beings, mythological monsters, the human and animal figures making 'strong talk' ... Totems were less valued for their workmanship than for their 'talk'" (*GP* 426). Udall argues that "[a]n important aspect of Carr's artistic and personal relationship with native peoples relied on her own 'outsider' status. For Carr, to be an artist was to be 'different' – marginalized from society in ways akin (at least in her mind) to the cultural isolation of indigenous peoples" (Udall 1, 35). Carr's Modernism[3], then, partly linked her with the turn toward the 'primitive' and partly

3) In hospital she put down in her diary that "Some say I am great and some that I am not modern. I don't think these young journalists know what or where or how I am. I am glad that all seem to agree that I am pre-eminently Canadian" (April 20th, 1937 – Crean 141)

reflected her multiple marginalization as a female artist, far from the centre of a still mostly colonial culture.

Industrial 'landscapes' can be viewed as sharp contrast with the world of Natives – they represent Modernism's interest in machines, new forms of architecture, a turn away from nature as depicted by Romantic artists. Lawren Harris (1885–1970), best known for his paintings of Lake Superior, at the beginning of his career – after returning from Berlin, where he studied art between 1904 and 1908 – wrote poems about Toronto's Ward and painted not only city streets, but also industrial buildings, like "The Gas Works" (1911–12). This early painting combines typically Impressionist painting techniques ("the transient effects of smoke and clouds ... a dreamy moodiness through a diffusion of light, softened outlines;" Murray 16) with Modernist subject matter. His poems written in the second decade of the 20th century speak about the 'Angst' of modern man in big cities, the crowds and noises.

> ... in the town, cars clatter along the streets,
> Harshly grumble as they gather speed, squeal around
> the curves, scrunch as they stop.
> And horse hooves pock-pock on the hard pavement.
> Motor horns shriek along every thoroughfare ... ("The Harbour," ***In the Ward*** 12)

While Harris's source was the harbour of Toronto, offering "no haven for men" (13), Adrian Hébert (1890–1967) painted several pictures about the harbour of Montréal in the mid-1920s, showing huge ships and another type of industrial architecture, namely grain elevators. The simplicity of these buildings caught the attention of Le Corbusier, too, who found that they "reflètent parfaitement leur fonction et elles tirent leur beauté de cette vérité fonctionnelle" (Lauzon and Leclerc 229). The same grain elevators fascinated poet A. M. Klein (1909–1972) in the mid-1940s who described the buildings as "blind and Babylonian/like something out of legend. ... /A box: cement, hugeness, and right angles" and compared them to Leviathan ("Grain Elevator," lines 2–3, 26). For Sinclair Ross (1908–1996), grain elevators meant a change (and male symbol) from the monotony of the prairie.

> [Mrs. Bentley and El Greco, the dog] walked as far as the last grain elevator again ... and watched a freight train shunting up and down the yard. ... The locomotive hissed out clouds of steam that reddened every time the fireman stoked. It started backing up presently....
> Then all assembled, the train pulled slowly past us. There seemed something mysterious and important in the gradual, steady quickening of the wheels. (172)

The modern city was seen not only as a location of industrial and commercial activities, but as a place where crowds of people can be found, particularly when they are shopping. Buying goods gained a new function as a result of mass production: it became a free-time activity, with publicities helping 'orient' people. The posters brought new forms and colours into the street-scape, as is manifest in Harris's famous painting "Jazz/Billboard" (1920) which shows two workers fixing a giant poster.

Critical assessment

Views about Modernism in Canada manifest rather extreme positions, ranging from Robert Kroetsch's frequently cited statement that culture in Canada moved from a Victorian phase to the Postmodern (thus skipping Modernism)[4], through "rather negative assessments as 'belated' or 'marginal' to more recent affirmative evaluations as an 'alternative' or 'medial,' 'counterpoint' to international modernism" (Breitbach 150). Marta Dvorak also suggests that "the modernist movement ... arrived later in Canada" (189), but if we do not limit our focus to literature or just one genre, we can observe that Modernism in Canada was not belated at all as is manifest in painting or in the anthropological interest in non-Western cultures.

In accordance with Lorraine York we agree that it would be misleading to suggest that the majority of the population in Canada (or elsewhere in the world) was eager to closely follow the trends of modern art – but the denial of a small group of devoted artists and interested audience could be at least as much misleading: after all, it is always a small proportion of the artistic production of a given period that will prove lasting and form the canon (160). As York sees it, "the narrative of poetic activity in Canada between the years of 1920 and 1960 had been a tale of triumphant modernism: of a sweep of postwar cosmopolitanism ... and culminating in a dramatic conflict between competing poetic forces of aestheticism and political consciousness during the 1940s and 1950s" (159).

Brian Trehearne in 1989 summed up this process with the following argumentation:

> The coincidence of our anti-colonial period, climaxing in the 1920s, and that phase in English criticism that avidly sought since the 1930s to shatter the respectability of influence studies ... has perhaps produced in our attitude to our literature too great a pride in our independent national achievement, too little willingness to understand the influences that have shaped our country's artistic traditions ... But it may be that we have arrived at a point of cultural security at which we will not be afraid to discover the influences that have shaped us, a point at which we can seek and take pride in the ways in which our artists have seized upon, and adapted ... the traditions of other countries and of foreign artists. (*Aestheticism* 9)

An important aspect is the inter-connectedness of Modernist artists in the country: the Group of Seven was functioning as the flagship of the process, its members had close links with European experimenting ateliers and American artists alike, including mutual visits to exhibitions and studios. These painters influenced young poets active in Montreal, established close links with Emily Carr in Victoria, B.C., and were engaged with renewing stage language at Hart House Theatre in Toronto, the best-known Canadian example of early-twentieth century 'little theatre movement' featuring contemporary European drama as well as new Canadian one-act plays. Canadians were among the very first to recognize and highlight the importance of the new means of communication (telephone, radio, television) and the rapid changes in transportation, travelling: these are represented in the arts, e.g. a car and an airplane adorn

4) Canadian literature "evolved directly from Victorian into Post-Modern. ... The country that invented Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye did so by not ever being Modern" (qtd. in Godard 121).

the friese (1937) by Charles Comfort above the main entrance of the art deco Stock Exchange building in Bay Street, Toronto. Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye directed theoretical discourse about Modernism toward new fields; therefore, we can firmly state that Canadian artists and theorists significantly contributed to our understanding of Modernism in culture.

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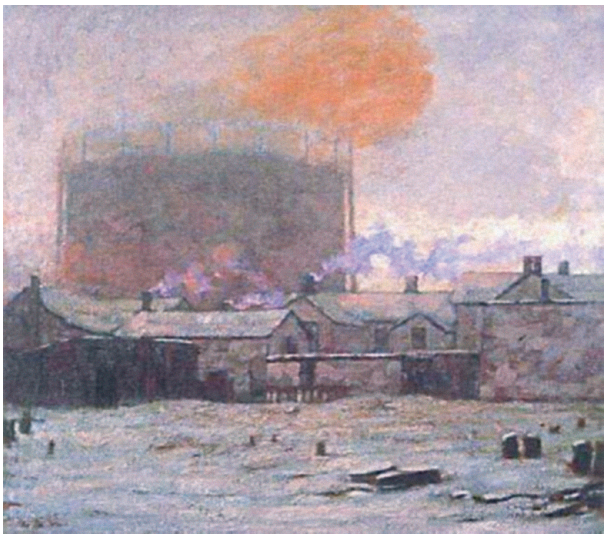
Emily Carr, *Indian Canoes Victoria Harbour*, c. 1895
watercolour on paper mounted on card

Emily Carr, *Indian Village, Ucluelet*, c. 1898

Emily Carr, *Totem Pole (Alert Bay)*, 1911

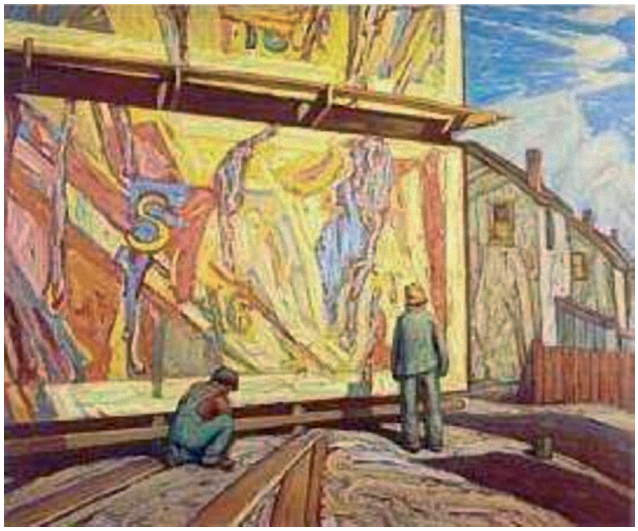
Emily Carr, *Street Alert Bay*, 1912



Lawren Harris, *The Gas Works*, 1911-1912

Adrian Hébert, *Montreal Harbour*, c. 1925

Adrian Hébert, *Magasinnages de Noel*, c. 1926



Lawren Harris, *The Billboard/Jazz*, 1920