

"Modernism and Obscenity". International Symposium

November 23rd 2018, University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès

Keynote Speaker: Rachel Potter, University of East Anglia

Proposals should include a 300 word long abstract and a short bio-bibliography and should be sent by May 17 to Philippe Birgy (birgy@univ-tlse2.fr) and Aurélie Guillain (aurelie.guillain@univ-tlse2.fr)

CALL FOR PAPERS

The relation between modernism and obscenity has been scrutinized in recent studies of relations between censorship and cultural productions (Bradshaw & Potter, Cotter, Parkes, Pease); the subject of the obscene has also been tackled in queer studies (Bersani, Valente) and affect studies (Pierce). Yet the close examination of specific examples has not been a central concern in these studies whose explicit aim was to propose general frameworks of interpretation. This symposium aims to raise again the question of the definition and the force of the obscene by looking at precise examples. Where does obscenity lie in each case?

A list of possible examples of 'obscene' modernist works could include: *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, *Paint it Today* by Hilda Doolittle, the 'King Bolo poems' by T.S. Eliot, *Sanctuary* by William Faulkner, *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *Lady Chatterley* by D. H. Lawrence, *Tarr* by Wyndham Lewis, 'With Usura' by Ezra Pound, *Fernhurst and Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein, the 'Crazy Jane poems' by W. B. Yeats, *The Day of the Locust* by Nathaniel West. This list is of course, far from being comprehensive.

In each case of 'obscenity', one may wonder what position is being assigned to the implied reader or viewer: when a text or a picture foregrounds its shocking character, when it suggests that it can offend, corrupt or even contaminate anyone who comes near it, who is being addressed? Is the implied addressee defined in terms of gender, class or ethos? To what extent can we regard obscenity as a feature of an avant-garde movement? What are the aesthetic and political stakes of an experimental work shockingly unveiling what should have remained concealed or unsaid?

To discuss obscenity as a tactical and aesthetic move, it is also necessary to reflect on the historical circumstances in which works are inscribed, notably on the laws and institutional norms regulating the reception and consumption of works: they can be accused of obscenity for various reasons and in each case, the dynamics of provocation, censorship and self-censorship need to be explored.

In the close study of obscene displays in particular works of art, one can also wonder if they must be regarded as 'abject material' blurring fundamental distinctions between subject and object, sameness and otherness (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*) and if obscene displays in works of fiction have to do with re-presenting some state of primordial confusion, pointing to a pre-symbolic relation to the world (Lacan).

To understand obscenity, should we compare it to an optical device turning the image of the loathsome into a perversely fascinating show? Modernism and its relation to voyeurism, to scopic drives and to the rise of mass spectatorship are questions still worth exploring in

relation to the obscene picture. The subversive or conservative function of the obscene may also be questioned: does the obscene unsettle binary oppositions and hierarchies between the civilized and the uncivilized, the tolerable and the intolerable, the raw and the refined, Dionysian and Apollinian forces? Or does it consolidate these dichotomies?

In this symposium, we welcome the close study of any painting, photographic work, film and text belonging to the modernist period in the English speaking world and bringing a form of obscenity into play. We welcome the analysis of its form, of its intertextual and intermedial resonances with other works, of how it positions itself and how it was received in its cultural, political, editorial contexts.

Select Bibliography

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