

BOOK REVIEW

Modernist Barthes

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Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Zahi Zalloua, eds, *Understanding Barthes, Understanding Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023)

It is no secret that Roland Barthes's relation to modernism was at times ambivalent, distanced, paradoxical. Celebrated at the height of his fame in the late 1970s as a 'collectionneur d'avant-gardes',¹ Barthes revealed in his lectures at the Collège de France a growing sense of discomfort with that label, questioning the value of some of modernism's key assumptions as well as the talent of some of its major representatives.² As Antoine Compagnon and others have shown, towards the end of his life we find Barthes turning towards what he now called a 'Romantisme large', uniting a rather heterogeneous group of writers including Flaubert, Mallarmé, Kafka, and Proust.³ Moving on from the structuralist and post-structuralist phases of his life, we see Barthes digressing from conventional ideas of modernism and revisiting classic and romantic writers instead, mobilising the likes of La Bruyère, Rousseau, Goethe, and Chateaubriand as key witnesses of his thought.

The present collection of essays, *Understanding Barthes, Understanding Modernism*, takes this oscillating quality of Barthes's writing into account and turns it into one of its main preoccupations. Barthes is introduced by the editors, Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Zahi Zalloua, as one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century (with a slightly unnecessary sidekick at Adorno, with whom Barthes has much more in common than is widely assumed), and the volume assesses key aspects of his work in 25 illuminating chapters. Perhaps the choice of contributors (mostly male and from US American and British institutions) could have been more diverse, and perhaps the outlook of the book's conception could have been more global. The individual chapters also vary in style, length, and the level of ambition. But the joint interest in Barthes as a moral philosopher for whom the art of writing was inherently intertwined with the

art of living (Di Leo), and the notable focus on the lasting media-theoretical significance of Barthes's work, speak to current ethical and social concerns, not least when considering the long shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first, 'Mapping Barthes', covers all major periods of Barthes's writing, assessing its modern literary and philosophical contributions. Part Two focuses on the 'Legacies and Afterlives' of Barthes's work following his untimely death in 1980, including the posthumously published material. Key themes that run through most of the essays assembled here are proximity and distance, opacity and transparency, authenticity and uncertainty, solitude and care, as they impact on our sense of self, our relation to other people, objects, images, and texts (Pavel, Stafford, Rapaport, Baldwin, Moriarty, O'Keeffe). There is also a shared interest in Barthes's relation to visual culture, notably photography, and film (Rabaté, Ungar, Andrew, O'Hara), and a focus on the multiple implications of the hedonist dimension of his writing (Di Leo, Teeuwen, Zalloua), celebrating, in one of the volume's most innovative contributions, Barthes's visual 'homosociabilities', while also pointing at 'the thin line' between aspects of Barthes's eroticism and the iconography of paedophilia (Nachtergaele). Established and less-well-known intertextual connections between Barthes and other writers are fruitfully explored (notably between Barthes, Gide, Proust, and Robbe-Grillet, but also between Barthes, Yeats, DeLillo, and Glissant). Except for a few minor glitches the book is well-edited (I struggle to picture Barthes's description of the Winter Garden photograph in *La Chambre claire* as a 'clusterfuck' involving mother and son), and well-presented (with rare typographical errors in names). The concluding glossary section provides brief definitions and histories of a selection of recurring terms in Barthes's work, offering a fine taste of how much more work could still be done in this context. The bibliographies at the end of each chapter are useful, and the index is helpful too as a tool for initial orientation.

As I read on, the editors' conceptual focus on Barthes's relation to modernism gets increasingly lost, wittingly or unwittingly reflecting the late Barthes's growing indifference to the idea of being classified as modern (or not).⁴ And yet, Di Leo and Zalloua's volume *Understanding Barthes, Understanding Modernism* is a very useful book to consult, providing us with an often persuasive, polyphonic, and suggestive account of the multifaceted nature of Barthes's work as an ongoing source of inspiration across the disciplinary divide.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, 'L'Image', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, pp. 512–19 (p. 517). Further references to the *Œuvres complètes* will be given in the form of *OC*, followed by the volume and page numbers.

² Roland Barthes, 'Soirées de Paris', in *OC* V, pp. 977–93 (p. 980).

³ Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: Notes de cours et de séminaires au Collège de France 1978–1979 et 1979–80*, ed. by Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2003), p. 383.

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Délibération', in *OC* V, pp. 668–81 (p. 676).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katja Haustein teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Kent. Her new book, *Alone with Others: An Essay on Tact in Five Modernist Encounters* with Marcel Proust, Helmuth Plessner, Theodor Adorno, François Truffaut, and Roland Barthes is out now from Cambridge University Press.

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