



Nikolova, Z 2022 Binary Modernisms: An Introduction.  
*Open Library of Humanities*, 8(1): 21, pp. 1–9. DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.8917>



Open Library of Humanities

## Binary Modernisms: An Introduction

Zlatina Nikolova, University of Exeter, UK, [z.nikolova2@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:z.nikolova2@exeter.ac.uk)

---

Seeking out new approaches to modernist studies, 'Binary Modernisms' adopts the digital, both its approaches and its products, for the critical investigation of Modernism. The following introduction briefly touches on the cultural and historical circumstances of both Modernism and the digital and identifies their parallel impact on art and our engagement with it.

---

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

🔓 OPEN ACCESS



Inspired by the urgency for new approaches to modernist studies, 'Binary Modernisms' adopts methods drawn from digital technologies and cultures and applies these to works from the late modernist period. The motivation behind this initiative arises from the historical development of technologies during this and the previous centuries, and the ways these technologies have facilitated shifts in our relationship to art and culture, both as producers and consumers. Taking its title from the binary code that is at the foundation of the digital world, this collection employs the digital as a critical lens for the investigation of modernist histories, literature, visual culture, and objects.

The early 20th century and the start of the 21st century were both prefixed by the emergence and swift adoption of new technologies that prompted change in social habits, culture and artistic production. Despite initial scepticism, society largely adopted these innovations and allowed for these new methods and tools to seep into our relationship with everyday life. While the early decades of the previous century unfolded against the backdrop of the standardisation of mechanised power, the iconography of rail tracks criss-crossing what had previously been peaceful countryside, and the bright lights of the emerging film industry, the first two decades of this century have been permeated by the agency of digital technologies and their introduction into artistic endeavours. Although these technological revolutions have manifested differently, there are similarities in their disruption of existing cultural production and our relationship to it. This Special Collection seeks to explore parallels between early 20th- and early 21st-century innovations in culture and art production, by subjecting examples of modernist culture, visual art and literature to examination by applying approaches from the field of digital studies. Acknowledging the changes in both the inception of and consumption of art and culture in the first two decades of the current century, this collection of essays highlights the parallels between the technologies that emerged in the early 20th century and the digital of the early 21st century. The collection thereby expands academic investigations of Modernism beyond existing canons, popular modernist networks, traditional practices of close reading and historic approaches. Broadening conventional boundaries, it encourages interdisciplinary parallels between Modernism and the Digital Humanities, as well as the study of lesser-known and non-Anglophone modernist works, figures and aspects of late modernist culture.

The early decades of the 20th century ushered a new style of life, prompted by industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as the development of certain strands of science and technology. Existing scholarly investigations recognise the significance of these inventions for the modernist perception of art production; the interconnection between the products of modernism and the technological progress of the early 20th

century has been subject to extensive study. For example, Angela Frattarola (2018) studies the effects of early 20th-century auditory technologies on sound perception and its representation in literature. Elsewhere, Eric B. White (2020) traces the use of technologies by avant-garde movements like the Futurists and the Dadaists as both a method and means of production in their endeavours. The experimentation of other modernist movements was further prompted by the proliferation of psychoanalytic theories and the evolution of the vocabulary used to discuss various states of the psyche. These developments in psychoanalysis further altered the way in which modernists interpreted and recorded the world towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Combined with the acceleration of life through mechanisation, the modernists' employment of psychoanalytic theories led to the fragmentation of the spatio-temporal continuity in literary narratives and greater interest in character psyche and the interiority of emotional worlds. The early 20th century then saw the rise of a multitude of journals and periodicals, literary magazines, and small presses that turned out publications and volumes which became definitive for the modernist period and often drew connections between the workings of the psyche and the production or capture of visual images through photography or film. The culture of little magazines and presses that fuelled many modernist careers is explored in a range of excellent texts, including Churchill and McKible's edited volume *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches* (2007), Jane Marek's *Women Editing Modernism: 'Little' Magazines and Literary History* (1995) and Ian Hamilton's *The Little Magazines: A Study of Six Editors* (1976).

Although industrialisation, new forms of labour organisation, and mechanised power invited change in social attitudes, no other phenomenon disrupted early 20th-century life as did World War I, an event that has itself become a significant branch of modernist studies. Modernism frequently focuses on the impact of grief, personal trauma, shellshock or loss in literary works and often pursues these thematic concerns in specific genres, such as life writing or autobiography (Frayn, 2017: 3). Titles that reflect on the impact of and depictions of the events of World War I include Allyson Booth's *Postcards from the Trenches* (1996), Trudi Tate's *Modernism, History and the First World War* (2013) and Andrew Frayn's *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War Prose, 1914–1930* (2014). Women's growing exposure to public spaces and employment during World War I led to more prominent representation of female-oriented imagery and narratives in both literature and visual culture, including government-informed recruitment initiatives (Grayzel, 2002: 9–26; 27–50). The imagery and campaigns urging women to encourage conscriptions or even informing them of their own patriotic duties as mothers and civilians were distributed through

periodicals and advertising, all products of the mass media that performed the functions of the current social media.

The emergence and adoption of new technologies led to the evolution of entirely new strands of art and culture production at the turn of the previous century. Although photographic technology, for example, was no longer a completely new invention by the early decades of the 20th century, its prominence ushered the era of filmmaking. Accessible to spectators of all classes and ages, film engrossed early 20th-century audiences and profoundly affected art as the industrial and financial frameworks it necessitated gave rise to other major branches of business and industry that continue to develop to this day. As such, film culture has become a major source of fascination for Modernist Studies, prompting the examination of film's history and development, as well as its intersection with modernist networks. Excellent examples of studies into the convergence of Modernism and cinema include David Trotter's *Cinema and Modernism* (2007), Laura Marcus's *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (2010), Sam Rohdie's *Film Modernism* (2016), Susan McCabe's *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (2005). Another fascinating inquiry into modernist takes on cinema is Lynne Kirby's *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (1997), a volume dedicated to the convergence of two technologies and their impact on 20th-century culture: cinema and the expanding railroad networks. These are just some of the many scholars who have recognised the significance of both film aesthetic and cinematic technologies for modernist culture, literature and art.

In comparable ways, the permeation of digital technology in the early years of the 21st century has already redefined our understanding of artistic practices and cultural history, dismantling our existing relationship to art. As with many of the technological innovations that underscore modernist works of the early years of the previous century, the digital was not new to the world by the turn of the millennium. However, it was not until the early 2000s that the digital's potential to alter communications, work and culture was substantially realised. Thus, this Special Collection adopts the digital as an approach to the study of Modernism, investigating how present digital disruption of cultural structures alludes to the creative processes that were pioneered by modernists at the beginning of the last century, as they set out to change the ways in which art represents the world. Just as modernist trends in literature, performance and visual art were seen as a form of rebellion against the obsolete 19th-century frameworks of culture production, this Special Collection posits that digital technologies have comparable transformative effects on cultural artefacts of the 21st century.

Currently, there is a small body of work that addresses the relationship between Modernism and digital culture. James O'Sullivan (2017: 283) argues that highly complex

modernist works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* or T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' are not incompatible with the tech-conditioned mass culture of the contemporary moment. Instead, he suggests all forms of consumption of these texts, including technology-oriented ones, only aid their popularity (O'Sullivan 2017:283). Thus, in a way, the digital becomes a vehicle of accessibility for a movement that is renowned for, and often rejected socially because of, its discursive and structural depth. In her *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (2014), Jessica Pressman offers a more ontological relationship between Modernism and the digital by delving into the parallels between modernist narrative structures and databases.

By contrast, Lev Manovich (2002: 19) argues that modernist artistic techniques and digital technologies are dissimilar because of Modernism's insistence on its self-imposed conditions, including medium-specificities, rules and guidelines of expressions formulated in manifestoes, and other similar instructions, followed only by the various smaller collectives that comprise early 20th-century Modernism. Writing about the technologies that altered visual culture and communication in earlier historical periods, such as photography and the printing press, Manovich (2002: 65-66) posits that the digital expands the use of its tools by building them into multiple software. Instead of limiting the possibilities for artistic expression, the tools of the digital and its subsequent products (software, hardware, and other objects that might involve the digital) may be deployed across infinite fields, disciplines and platforms because, as Manovich notes, the user is presented with the same commands regardless of the software or platform they are using: copy, paste, delete and find, and similar functions may be identified across a wide range of software and devices. Ubiquitous through its omnipresence, the mission of the digital is unlike earlier technological inventions that address only one activity or form of expression. It is, however, arguable that this tendency towards a unified focus can be detected in certain branches of Modernism, as movements sought to define the works they produced through medium-determined specificity.

The present selection of essays tackles these and the many other problems posed by the application of digital approaches to modernist works, by offering commentaries on case studies drawn from international modernisms. The first essay of the collection: Stephanie Danielle Bender's 'ringl + pit: (Un)figuring the New Woman'(2022), investigates the photographic works of Ellen Auerbach and Greet Stern, whose studio ringl + pit alters the advertising formulas found in German print media of the 1920s and 1930s. The imagery employed across the advertisements points to the discrepancies between media-informed femininity of the period and the real experiences of female self-perception that dominated German society.

This collection's interest in non-Anglophone modernisms continues in articles by Karolina Koczynska and Zach Pearl. Koczynska's essay, 'From Print to Digital: Reappropriation of the Ready-Made Image in the Works of Margit Sielska and Weronika Gęsicka' (2022), reflects on divergent approaches to the creation of ready-made collages, altered by the technologies employed for their production. Extending the theme of femininity, this article draws parallels between the works of the two artists and the shared creativity that arises from the processes of appropriation and manipulation of ready-made and found imagery (Koczynska 2022). Thus, Koczynska's text points to the existing interrelationship between certain modernist practices of art production and digital culture's extension of these methods (2022). Zach Pearl's article, 'Brandon is a Network Not a Name: Fictocriticism & the Cyberfeminist Art of Shu Lea Cheang' (2022), reflects on artist Shu Lea Cheang's participatory installations and non-linear narratives as amenable object-texts that users can navigate and contribute to through critical play and improvisation. Examining Cheang's *Brandon* (1998), Pearl posits that the techniques adopted in the depiction of the queer body recall processes and methods employed by Dadaism and Surrealism (2022).

In his essay, 'The Geographies of Poverty: Modernist Photo Texts in the Age of Social Media' (2022), Donal Harris investigates two contemporary photo text projects: Matt Black's *American Geography* (2014–present) and Radcliffe 'Ruddy' Roye's *When Living is a Protest* (2015–present). Harris explores their adaptation of the style of the New Deal documentary to the aesthetic of the social media platform Instagram (2022). Raising questions about the place of the photographer and photography as a medium in the 21st century, Harris also reflects on the ways digital methods may emulate Modernism's insistence on media-specificity in the current digital contexts of recording poverty and social crises (2022).

Another article dedicated to the parallels between Modernist and digital processes, Diogo Marques's contribution "'Grasp All, Lose All": Raising Awareness Through Loss of Grasp in Seemingly Functional Interfaces' (2022), argues that the dysfunctional digital interfaces that are part of contemporary artworks, specifically digital literature, are akin to early avant-garde attempts at disruption and subversion. As such, the strategies employed by digital interfaces and digital literature inherit the continuous tensions between tradition and innovation, countered by the modernisms of the early 20th century (Marques 2022).

The current collection is concluded by two articles also dealing with innovative approaches to literary texts and reflecting on questions of affect and understanding. Riley Hanick's 'Enfolding the Hand, Entrancing the Eye: Erica Baum's *Dog Ear*' (2022), takes up Baum's book *Dog Ear* as an example of the reconfiguration of a literary text into

a sculpture. This sculptural intervention into the book's material body modifies it as an object, actively altering its existence and significance in the world. These alterations also impact the media and technology through which the book's content and the book itself might be examined; it is either a work of poetry, or a book of photography. According to Hanick (2022), Baum's book presents as an object of interest not because it is a work of poetry or photography but rather because the act of folding the corners of pages alters the relationship between word and image: repeating and solidifying moments of exposure and concealment. Finally, Filipa da Gama Callado's article (2022) revisits Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). This article is not so much a critical reading but rather a query into the processes of reading and textual analysis. Callado (2022) employs the tools of the TEI (the Text Encoding Initiative) to mark up the first chapter of Wilde's manuscript revisions as an investigation of the text's expression of homoeroticism. Questioning the suppression of homoeroticism between the three characters introduced in the novel's first chapter, Callado (2022) exposes the limitations of the TEI's processes in their handling of discrete data, employing the digital as yet another tool of close reading, an established method of literary studies.

A study into methods and processes, this Special Collection demonstrates that the digital is not only a discipline or even an object in itself but it may also be repurposed as a critical lens for the exploration of texts, images, and objects. The disruption it has caused to life and culture by dismantling traditional methods of production and engagement can be translated into academic inquiry, destabilising existing modes of scholarly investigation and offering another approach to familiar works. The digital's reputation for disruption finds its equal in Modernism's rejection of modes of artistic expression in the early 20th century and its mission to create both new forms of art and new ways to engage with it. Thus, the parallels identified across this collection's essays pose the question whether the digital and its impact on life and culture are not simply another iteration of Modernism; if they are not just Modernism 2.0.

---



## Competing Interests

Zlatina Nikolova is the editor of this Special Collection.

---

## References

- Bender, Stephanie Danielle** 2022 'ringl + pit: (Un)figuring the New Woman', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6392>
- Booth, Allyson** 1996 *Postcards from the Trenches: Negotiating the Space Between Modernism and the First World War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Calado, Filipa da Gama** 2022 'Encoding Queer Erasure in Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6407>
- Churchill, Susanne W** and **McKible, Adam** 2007 *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Frattarola, Angela** 2018 *Modernist Soundscapes: Auditory Technology and the Novel*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813056074.001.0001>
- Frayn, Andrew** 2014 *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War prose, 1914–1930*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719089220.001.0001>
- Frayn, Andrew** 2017 'Introduction: Modernism and the First World War', *Modernist Cultures*. 12.1 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/mod.2017.0153>
- Grayzel, Susan R** 2002 *Women and the First World War*. London and Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Hamilton, Ian** 1976 *The Little Magazines: A Study of Six Editors*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Hanick, Riley** 2022 'Enfolding the Hand, Entrancing the Eye: Erica Baum's Dog Ear', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6385>
- Harris, Donal** 2022 'The Geographies of Poverty: Modernist Photo Texts in the Age of Social Media', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6337>
- Kirby, Lynn** 1997 *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Koczynska, Karolina** 2022 'From Print to Digital: Reappropriation of the Ready-Made Image in the Works of Margit Sielska and Weronika Gęsicka', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6390>
- Manovich, Lev** 2002 *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press.
- Marcus, Laura** 2010 *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marek, Jane** 1995 *Women Editing Modernism: 'Little' Magazines and Literary History*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Marques, Diogo** 2022 "'Grasp All, Lose All": Raising Awareness Through Loss of Grasp in Seemingly Functional Interfaces', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6393>



**McCabe, Susan** 2005 *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**O'Sullivan, James** 2017 'Modernist Intermediality: The False Dichotomy between High Modernism and Mass Culture', *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, 98(3): pp. 283–309. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1246136>

**Pearl, Zach** 2022 'Brandon is a Network Not a Name: Fictocriticism & the Cyberfeminist Art of Shu Lea Cheang', *Open Library of Humanities* 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6391>

**Pressman, Jessica** 2014 *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media*. Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937080.001.0001>

**Rohdie, Sam** 2016 *Film Modernism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

**Tate, Trudi** 2013 *Modernism, History and the First World War*. Humanities-Ebooks, LLP. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/exeter/detail.action?docID=3306137> [Last accessed 24 May 2022].

**Trotter, David** 2007 *Cinema and Modernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**White, Eric B** 2020 *Reading Machines in the Modernist Transatlantic: Avant-Gardes, Technology and the Everyday*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474441490.001.0001>

