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### Popular modernism: representations of modernist literature in popular culture

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**Publication date**  
2012

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Loontjens, J. (2012). *Popular modernism: representations of modernist literature in popular culture*.

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## Summary

This study is a product of fascination and passion: passion for literary writing in general and a particular fascination with the works of a number of authors, who have never ceased to inspire me to continue thinking, questioning and rereading. I focus on works of four canonical modernist novelists: Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Franz Kafka and how these works are represented in contemporary popular culture. The novels are written in a period when writers were reshaping literary fiction, leaving behind the goals of literary realism. Consequently, each of the novels self-reflexively also deals with questions of writing. This self-reflexivity is central to my study; the author's eye that turns inwards, striving to describe personal impressions and perceptions as well as the processes of perceiving and writing.

I deploy modernist literature as a means to analyze the role and function of literary writing in general in contemporary western society. Towards that end, I analyze the reappearances of the novels of these authors in contemporary western culture. I have chosen to select modernist novels, excluding other modernist art forms, because I am especially interested in the role of writing in present-day society: the increasing interest in memoir writing, book clubs, the booming sales of autobiographic literature and the celebrity status of the author. In short, I discuss the ways in which the image of modernist literature transforms, in which it travels through time, discourses and contexts and what this tells us about literature today.

In the first chapter, I analyze the "beginning moment" of writing by looking at two writers that suffer from the fear of beginning to write. The first is Charlie Kaufman in the film *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002), for which the real-life Charlie Kaufman wrote the screenplay; the second is the narrator, Marcel, of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (first published in 1913 – 1927). Following Mieke Bal, I approach Proust's novel and Jonze's film predominantly as textual objects that "theorize" a particular part of cultural history. The act of bringing these two works into a shared context can be defined as what Bal calls

“preposterous history” (1999: 6-7). It is not the relation between the film and the novel in itself that is an example of preposterous history, but rather my act of combining these works that might be called preposterous. In other words, I complicate *pre-* and *post-* by reading Proust through the framework of Charlie’s ideas about writing, and thus hope to produce what Bal calls “productive uncertainties” (7). By bringing these two works into dialogue with one another, contemporary-modernist perspectives on beginning, originality, authenticity, as well as adaptation are brought to the fore. In *Adaptation*, the question of originality is inextricably bound up with reflections on what it means to write an adaptation. On the one hand, the film shows that any story, even an adaptation, can be approached as a new one. On the other hand, however, the film shows that also new stories are themselves adaptations.

*Adaptation* confirms that early modernist ideas about originality or for instance the author have become clichés of literary writing. As those principles have become clichés, they also have become stronger and less complex and ambiguous in comparison to the ideas from which they stem. In Proust, all principles are ambiguous, Janus-faced and liable to change, hence always partly disagreeing with the principles proclaimed by Charlie. Thus, my analysis of the relation between Proust and *Adaptation* shows that what we consider to be modernist characteristics today often conforms to contemporary literary paradigms rather than to ideas presented in modernist texts. On the one hand, I argue that modernist paradigms have become paradigms of literary writing in general, while, on the other hand, these paradigms are the products of recent history and offer an image of modernism that has been developed after the fact.

In the second chapter, I continue studying the assumption that today modernism has become exemplary for literary writing by analyzing the reappearance of another icon of modernist literature: William Faulkner. In 2005, Oprah Winfrey selected three novels by Faulkner for her book club. As Catherine Gunther Kodat writes, “the summer 2005 reading selection for Oprah Winfrey’s book club is probably the strongest (*if not also the strangest*) indicator that something is afoot” (added italics, 2007: 180). Kodat’s remark aptly illustrates the mix of wonder, praise and disdain in the reactions of scholars and literary critics to Winfrey’s book club.

In this chapter, the main focus is on the representation of time, in literature and popular culture. While Winfrey repeatedly emphasizes the importance of living in the present, with her selection of Faulkner's books she foregrounds the painful history of the segregation in the South. Although she propagates the belief that presentism will enhance one's life, her choice for Faulkner's, as well as Morrison's novels, proves that she is able to merge her wish to enjoy the present with a genuine interest in history and literature; literature which is directed to a painful past, without offering any hope for a better future. However, her approach of the past reminds of Fredrick Jameson, who argues that pop culture reduces the past to mere citation. Jameson claims that the postmodern era can be defined by "a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality" (2004: 193).

Faulkner's representation of time stands in stark contrast to Winfrey's approach. Besides, they also differ in opinion about exposure of the author's life. In his essay "On Privacy" (2004 [1955]), Faulkner argues that the exposure of one's personal life deprives one of one's identity. For Faulkner individual freedom includes a reciprocal respect for each other's choices and privacy. For Winfrey, however, individual freedom is mainly connected to the possibility of personal success and the opportunity of climbing the social ladder. The process through which the private becomes public and the highly personal becomes impersonal is closely connected to her perspective on temporality. The emphasis on the "unique subjectivity and unique existence in the present," using Jameson's words, creates the impression that the realization of one's uniqueness is naturally connected to the "now" (2003: 709). Yet, it is not the present that makes one unique, on the contrary, it is one's past. The "now" is the only moment that one can directly share; as such it is the most communal moment, if one can speak in such terms.

If the modernists related to history through condemning it and through their wish to break with tradition, pop culture's presentism has no intention to force a break, nor to destroy or radically leave behind history. On the contrary, it rather plays with history and tradition, eclectically and ironically. Perhaps Jameson is right that history is thus reduced to mere citation, yet, on the other

hand, through *Oprah's Book Club* Faulkner's work reaches a new readership, instigating discussions on literature and history and challenging clear distinctions between high, low, modernist and popular culture.

In the third chapter, I consider the role of the author with regard to modernist ideas concerning authors, as well as the function of the author in the contemporary literary landscape. I do not discuss a particular modernist in this chapter, but rather the inheritance of a modernist approach of literature in the figure of the autobiographical author. To analyze the continuation of modernist ideas about the author in literary criticism as well as in contemporary literature I look at the figure of the self-expressive author in the case of contemporary author JT LeRoy. LeRoy is the author of the novels *Sarah* (2000), *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001) and *Harold's End* (2004). The story about his authorship makes him into an apt case for this chapter, since LeRoy's work was praised for its autonomous style and lyricism, while the story of LeRoy's life was also increasingly exposed. During approximately six years, the large readership of JT LeRoy believed that he was a teenage boy, who as a child had been pimped out as a cross-dressing prostitute by his mother. In February 2006, the author, who was supposed to be in his early twenties at that time, was unmasked as a forty-year-old woman, called Laura Albert.

Modernist authors, such as Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot, have argued that the perceptions and experiences of the fictional character should not be equated with the author. The effacement of the author was taken up by the New Critics as well as structuralist and poststructuralist philosophers. In the famous essay "The Death of the Author" (1986 [1968]), Roland Barthes argues that modernist writers like Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust were the first to attempt to subvert the "Author's empire" in favor of writing (50). These authors demonstrated that the author is not the source of the text; the author does not come before, the text after. The author, Barthes argues, is "born *at the same time* as his text" (52).

In 1920, T.S. Eliot writes: "the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality" (1934: 56). Eliot's perspective on literary writing is a striking example of the antisubjectivist or impersonal aesthetics, with which modernism often is associated. Modernists

distance themselves from the idea of self-expression derived from Romanticism. I am interested in the question what we actually mean when we brand literature as autobiographic. How can it be excluded from high literature, as Eliot prescribes? Autobiography, intention and truth are all connected; yet, their relationship is not self-evident. If an autobiography is unmasked as (partly) untrue, the author's intention and the labeling of the book as autobiographical are easily considered to be deceitful. The question then is what the criteria are for the label "autobiography."

I reread Michel Foucault's seminal essay "What Is an Author" (2000) as well as Barthes's essay through the framework of JT LeRoy's hoax. Paul de Man argues that autobiography is not a genre, but a mode of reading, a figure "of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (1984: 70). Consequently, even when acknowledging the death of the author and the birth of the reader, the reader may find autobiographic aspects in the text. When Barthes moves from the emphasis on the author to the reader, from origin to destination, he dismisses the earlier mode of reading. Yet, in my opinion, as a reader one moves between different figures of understanding while reading: at one moment one looks from a linguistic perspective, then from a poststructuralist or feminist perspective, then again from a historic or biographic perspective. While these last two kinds of reading have been categorized as lowbrow by modernists, contemporary media and Internet culture show that the interest in author's lives only grows: the lives of authors are scrutinized in talk shows, human interest documentaries and weblogs.

By inventing JT LeRoy as a cross-dressing boy who wishes to be a girl, Albert could hide her own identity, hijack the idea of autobiography, and play with the gender expectations of the literary market. Today, the author has become a construct of importance to the work, because the construct is becoming part *of* the work. I look at how the meaning of intention, autobiography, authorship and readership shifts through time by reading JT LeRoy's hoax through modernist principles.

I continue analyzing these issues in the fourth chapter, in which I bring Virginia Woolf's ideas on realism and biography in dialogue with Michael Cunningham's book *The Hours* (1999), as well as with the film adaptation by

Stephen Daldry. The book and the film are for a large part about Woolf's life and her writing. Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film are particularly relevant for my study because, on the one hand, they contribute to the portrayal of the distinguished modernist author Virginia Woolf, suggesting they paint an accurate, if fragmented, picture of her authorship. On the other hand, both the book and the film turn modernist writing and reading into their central theme, according to which truth is always something elusive, dependent on subjective interpretation. Especially the novel makes Woolf's thoughts on literature and its relation to reality into a central theme, evoking questions about truth, representation and knowledge.

Modernist literature has become known for its critique of the belief in objective representation. In Stephen D. Dowden's words: "Principally, [modernism] is a reaction against the quixotry of dogmatic realism, against the positivistic optimism that narrative fiction can really be the impartial reflection of reality" (1986: 11). In two of her most anthologized essays "Modern Fiction" (2003 [1919]) and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1966) Woolf attacks realism, arguing that the novelist should no longer attempt to describe the world as objectively as possible. Instead, Woolf holds, the novelist should be "concerned with the spirit" (1984: 147). However, she does not repudiate all realism, but tries "to achieve a more authentic engagement with the real than *realism*, so called, could possibly attain," as Jeff Wallace formulates it (2007: 19).

The effects of truthfulness that I study in Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film mostly concern historical references. Using a letter that is written by Woolf herself, the novel deploys historical material to create a reality effect, the suggestion of truth within a fictional framework. I make use of Brian McHale's analysis of standards for historical fiction in comparison to postmodernist fiction (1987). His categorization of the use of historical references in different genres allows me to analyze how the references in Cunningham's novel function and what kind of truth or reality effects are at play. As I try to demonstrate, Daldry's portrayal of Woolf is frequently historically incorrect; yet, those mistakes actually contribute to the realist totality of the film, or to use Harshav's terminology, to the coherence of the frame of reference.

I study the ways in which the film solicits what Mieke Bal calls a “realist reading” in contrast to a “textual” reading (2006: 216-246). Bal argues that a realist reading is led by a convention of unity: the reader reads coherence into the reality that is found in the picture or text. Instead of a realist reading, which implies blindness to possible lacks, Bal promotes a textual mode of reading that allows for constant activity, a shaping and reshaping of sign-events. This is the paradox of realist reading: the convention of unity that it exerts produces a constructed truth that is necessarily artificial and fictitious.

Additionally, I analyze how Cunningham’s selection of the first version of Woolf’s last letter and his focus on the originating moment of Woolf’s writing suggest a belief in the truth of original and unedited material. Valuing authentic material seems in contradiction with the postmodernist deconstruction of the foundations on which concepts as origin and authenticity are based. This paradox of a focus on original material and a complexly layered intertextuality characterizes the novel *The Hours*.

In the fifth and last chapter, I concentrate on the process of ending. Many modernist novels are known for their equivocal endings. Franz Kafka did not consider any of his novels finished. One can question whether Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Robert Musil’s *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* or James Joyce’s *Finnigan’s Wake* are completed works. When is a novel finished? A writer finishes a book by writing the ending, but perhaps the writer finishes the story by rewriting the beginning or by deciding that the rewriting has to end, even if it is not finished. There is an obvious difference between the ending of a writing process and the ending of a story. In this last chapter, I consider these questions in relation to Franz Kafka’s work, as well as to his afterlife in the tourist industry of Prague.

I look at the representation of Kafka’s work in contemporary tourist guides. Most walking tours and tourist guides in Prague point out the places where Kafka lived, where he was born in 1883, as well as the supposed locations that play a role in his work. While tourist guides connect the city’s topography with Kafka’s life and work, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1997), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that the streets, offices, and buildings shed their spatiality. The topography in his work has no specific spatial logic, they argue.

Walter Benjamin reaches a similar conclusion in several of his essays on Kafka. I am interested in the way in which Deleuze's and Guattari's analysis of Kafka's topography may be related to the way in which Prague is presented in tourist guides as Kafka's city as well as to the question of ending.

Kafka's narrators continuously express themselves by reflecting on situations that suddenly take an unexpected turn or announce a sudden end or change, which makes the narrators aware of possible endings. Yet, simultaneously the worries of the characters express the impossibility of ending, or reaching a conclusion, because their situation always transforms. While this awareness sometimes brings about a slight nervousness in Kafka's characters, simultaneously it is the cause of the protagonists' rather aimless wandering that characterizes many of Kafka's stories. This is also one of the reasons for the comparison between his protagonists and tourists. Antony Johae compares Josef K. with a traveler that "enters a foreign city for the first time without a map" (1996: 19). Comparatively, Rolf J. Goebel compares K. with the figure of the *flâneur* (2002: 45).

In the essay "Franz Kafka: *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*" (1999), Benjamin argues that procrastination forms the "true meaning of that noteworthy and often striking fullness of detail which according to Max Brod lay at the heart of Kafka's search for perfection and the true way" (496). The lack of closure in Kafka's work is mirrored by his presentation of death that cannot be trusted to be a definite ending. As Martin Heidegger argues, it is a mistake to understand death as a form of fulfillment. Likewise when reading Kafka's work one realizes that actually no project, small or large, can be "fulfilled." Each protagonist experiences continuously that he is "not-yet" there: the endings of the projects or of the pursuits are endlessly procrastinated, which makes one aware of all potential directions it could take.

Kafka preferred to have his work destroyed when he died. His work only survived his death thanks to the care of Max Brod. Not only his work survived, the image of Kafka also received a new life as the famous Czech author, which he never was while alive, a German Jew who never learnt to write Czech. To conclude this chapter, I discuss the role of death and afterlife in relation to our understanding of ending. I bring the endlessness inherent to Kafka's style of

writing in dialogue with Heidegger's analysis of death as the "not-yet" as well as with Blanchot's texts on death and literature. While ending this chapter on the infinite postponement of ending, and of death, this chapter should be the closure of my study, which, then again, contributes to the continuation of the afterlife of modernism.