Cities of Global Modernism

Introduction

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To study modernism is, often, to study the city. What would *Mrs. Dalloway* be without London, *Ulysses* without Dublin, and *Manhattan Transfer* without New York? In the early decades of the twentieth century, the city offered a lens through which modernist writers and artists could process the modern condition. Inducing states of alterity, alienation, and anonymity, the city became a decisive trope in the art and literature of the period, representing, by turns (and sometimes simultaneously), a utopia and a dystopia, a paradise and a hell. Borrowing from the urban codes and rhythms of the modern city, modernism developed a new spatial self-awareness, where borderlines, labyrinths, monumentality, and density informed the shapes and forms of writing, painting, filmmaking, photography, and other modes of artistic expression.

The last two decades have seen a surge of scholarly interest in global modernism – a capacious phrase that expands the scope of modernist study to think beyond the Western frameworks that have traditionally governed the field. But what happens when we bring the city to bear on this discourse? What happens when one of modernism's most definitive tropes – rooted, as it has been, in the

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mythos of 'the West' – gets decentred? What, in other words, do we mean when we talk about 'cities of global modernism'? As the papers in this special issue attest, the answer to this question is manifold. On the one hand, this issue of *Modernist Cultures* is concerned with how global modernist writers and artists have approached, comprehended and coded the very concept of the modern city; how writers and artists working beyond the Western metropole have thought and represented urbanism in ways that challenge or alter received notions of the modernist-city complex through the production of literature and visual art.

At the same time, there is a question about the physical cities out of which modernist works have emerged. The papers gathered here are concerned not only with how the concept of the city has informed modernist literature, but how modernism has shaped liveable cities, and how these urban centres then produce artists and their works. The relationship between modernism and the city has always been twofold in this respect; a seesawing between the city of the mind and the city inhabited by the body, or between 'the metropolis and mental life', to borrow the title of Georg Simmel's seminal sociological study. Finally, there must also be, if less explicitly, a question concerning the development of the city itself during the modernist period. Inevitably, we are drawn to the question of how we delineate that timeframe. Traditionally, Western modernism has been confined to the years 1900–1930; temporal goalposts that are often widened to include the last decade of the 19th century and the decade leading up to the Second World War. In recent years, however, literary scholars have traced 'the tenacious survivals of late modernism well into the post-war period', as Neal Alexander does in *Late Modernism and the Poetics of Place* (2022).[1] These questions about the afterlives of literary modernism also have a bearing on the development of the city: when we talk about cities of modernism, what characterises a modernist city?

In 1900, the tallest free-standing structure in the world was the Eiffel Tower. Completed in 1889 – less than half a century after the start of Haussmann's modernisation of the French capital – the 984ft tower marked the apex of urban modernity, with its wrought-iron lattice structure, hydraulic elevators, and mobile electric spotlights. As a feat of pure engineering and modern technological sophistication, the Eiffel Tower would remain an international symbol of urban modernity until, in 1930, it was superseded by New York's Chrysler Building. The birth – and rapid spread – of the skyscraper epitomised a new era in urban modernity: the ascendancy of the American city. For the next 68 years, the title of world's tallest building remained limited to US

cities (first New York and then Chicago), a fact that reflected America's geopolitical dominance in the long postwar era. But on the eve of the millennium, in 1998, Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Towers became the first in a series of buildings in the East to lay claim to the accolade, signalling the decisive shift away from Western hegemony that has characterised the first decades of the twenty-first century.[2]

Building height is not a metric for measuring the success – economic, cultural, or otherwise – of a city or a nation, or indeed for quantifying modernity. But the narrative sketched above does offer an illustration of broader global shifts in urbanisation over the last 100 years. A similar trend can also be mapped in terms of urban density. As Ian Goldin and Tom Lee-Devlin note in *Age of the City* (2023), 'by 1900, nine of the ten largest cities in the world were in Europe or the United States, up from just four a century earlier. Today, not one makes that list'.[3] There are a multitude of factors that have contributed to these recalibrations in urban distribution. In some countries – including China, Japan, and South Korea – the massive expansion of urbanisation is symptomatic of rapid transitions to industrialization and modernisation in the postwar period, establishing these countries as major economic players on the world stage. Elsewhere, however, in many of the world's less developed states, the growth of urban zones in countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo, India, or Brazil, is more often associated with high rates of poverty and climate change-induced migration.[4] To talk about cities of global modernism today, then, must be to countenance these larger geopolitical shifts. The contributions that comprise this special issue take us from Tokyo to Jerusalem, stopping along the way at Otaru, Shanghai, Singapore, Lagos and Havana, and ranging across a period of almost 100 years. The broad temporal and geographic scope of these papers agitates not only received narratives about *when* modernism happened but also, crucially, *where*. Yet the question remains: what do we mean when we talk about the 'global' city of modernism?

Today, the term global in an urban context tends to refer to the global*ised* or international city, which is often a shorthand for the increasingly homogeneous neoliberal metropolis, connected by world markets, financial industries, and the international networks made possible by the internet.[5] Nowhere is this more visible than in the wholesale export of the High Tech architecture that emerged in the UK and Europe in the late 1970s, but which has morphed into what we might call a contemporary internationalist architecture. Over the past two decades, 'starchitects' Richard Rogers, Norman

Foster, Renzo Piano, Rem Koolhaas, and others have won high-profile commissions in affluent cities in the Middle East and SouthEast Asia to design what Hal Foster calls a 'banal cosmopolitanism' that produces merely 'an image of the local for circulation to the global'.[6] In recent years, however, artists and architects have sparked a backlash against these often culturally vacuous urban projects. When, for the first time in its history, the Pritzker Prize was awarded to a Chinese architect, Wang Shu, the awarding committee noted that: 'Urbanization, as everywhere else in the world, must happen in harmony with local culture and needs. We hope [. . .] that the many opportunities of urban planification and architecture will consider both the unique heritage of this country and its future needs in terms of sustainability'.[7]

The model of the global city that the papers in this special issue foreground is also one that thinks about local and historical cultures through the production of art and literature – even when they draw explicitly on modernist protocols established in Europe and the UK. In other words, this special issue resists condensed narratives of globalisation and internationalisation, reflecting instead on the complex ways in which modernism and modernity have come into contact (and often into conflict) with urban locales across the globe. This is not to suggest that modernism – whether literary, artistic, or architectural – is simply an export of the West. Rather, it is to reveal the ways in which modernism has developed, evolved, and modified as it has moved through and across the global centres of the twentieth century. It is to consider the ways in which shifting temporal and geographic contexts have continually and innovatively reshaped an aesthetic that risks ossification if limited to its early twentieth century, Western-centric moment. And it is to think about these possibilities specifically in relation to the modern city and its veering terrains.

Tracing this global narrative thus reveals a need for the revision of received scholarly assumptions around the historical relationship between modernism and the city. The development of new urban centres across the globe prompts us to look backwards and ask questions about the identities and functions of these cities in the early part of the twentieth century. What did modernism mean to cities outside Europe and the USA? What tensions existed between a 'universal' or singular experience of modernity and national or native traditions? How did socioeconomic conditions frame the relationship between modernism and the city? And how were Western literary and artistic techniques deployed by artists working out of 'peripheral' urban centres? By posing these, and other, questions, this special issue of *Modernist Cultures* offers historical responses, not only to the

changing fate of the global city (how we live in it, how we respond to it, and how it shapes our national, social, and personal identities), but to the twenty-first century urban imaginary.

We aim to offer here a route to a comparative approach to the study of modernism and the city, in response to the ongoing 'unprecedented expansion' of Modernist Studies, as Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz aptly call it in the opening to *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, to become more and more linguistically and geographically inclusive.[8] While much work by modernist scholars in recent years has embraced the global turn in the field, significantly less has been done to situate the modernist city globally. One important work in this direction, and a significant predecessor to this special issue, is Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker's *Geographies of Modernism* (2005), in which they ask the burning question, '*where* was modernism?' (emphasis in original).[9] With their volume they seek to address this by recognizing the city as the undeniable natural hotbed of modernism, while at once pointing to the necessity for further research on modernist cityscapes *other* than the typical sites of New York, Paris, and London, and the cultural and artistic bearing of these cities on modernism's international legacy.

In spite of significant research conducted over the last decade on the geographies of modernism, much of this work has overlooked the city in the larger context of Global Modernism, or at the modernist city from a comparative, transnational perspective, in line with the expansion of modernist studies as a field. Lise Jaillant and Alison E. Martin, in their introduction to an earlier special issue of *Modernist Cultures*, entitled 'Global Modernism' (2018), attempted to answer Brooker and Thacker's question by 'look[ing] beyond the metropolitan centres normally associated with modernism'. But, instead of turning to the global urban centres of modernism(s), they focused on the circulation and 'travelling' of modernist texts.[10] Only a year later, in *Modernism, Space, and the City: Outsiders and Affect in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and London* (2019), Andrew Thacker addresses again the importance of an expansive approach to the role of the city in modernism, offering a comparative account of modernist writers' relationship to the city – if, however, still restricted to exclusively European metropoles.

With their revolutionary anthology *Global Modernists on Modernism* (2020), Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross offer a clear response to locating modernism by presenting us, in a single volume, with modernist texts from an unprecedented geographical and linguistic range. There cannot be a single 'aesthetic mode of modernity', they helpfully remind us, and any understanding of Global Modernism

must necessarily take into account the multiplicity and diversity of artistic, literary, and human experience in the various corners of the globe.[11] While global cities do make the background of some of the texts anthologised there, they are not the focus of Moody and Ross's (and their fellow editors') enterprising archival work. Adding to the ongoing scholarly debate on Global Modernism, this special issue offers comparative approaches to reading urban modernist centres from around the world by bringing together modernist scholars from diverse geographical areas and academic disciplines. Entering itself into productive dialogue with our precursor, the work of Jaillant and Martin in *Modernist Cultures*, we are keen to continue this conversation within the same journal, this time, however, explicitly focusing on the global city, covering urban centres in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, and adopting a cross-disciplinary scope with papers from scholars working in literature, Hispanic studies, visual cultures, and urban studies.[12]

The essays gathered in this special issue fall loosely into two halves, tracking across both place and period. In part I, a cluster of essays by Kunio Shin, Nan Zhang, and Kevin Riordan trace the development of modernism in early twentieth-century Asia, where the rapid acceleration of Westernized modernization gave rise to mounting anxieties about the erosion of native traditions and the future of social development. Literary depictions of Asian cities, in these readings, not only challenge familiar East-West dichotomies but also refresh prevailing notions of modernism's scope and temporality. Shin draws attention to how cities like Tokyo and Otaru embodied conflicting tendencies in interwar Japan: an embrace of urban modernity tempered by questionings of authentic cultural identity; vibrant metropolitan experiences set against xenophobic attitudes towards foreign influences. Through close examination of engagement with modernist techniques in William Plomer's *Sado* (1931) and Itō Sei's *Streets of Fiendish Ghosts* (1937), both significant city novels, Shin's essay builds on Sherry Simon's notion of a 'translational city', which emphasises influences of 'the demographics, institutional arrangements and imaginative histories of urban life' on the translational dynamics of '[c]ontact, transfer and circulation among languages' that coexist in the same city. Cities such as Tokyo and Otaru, in these literary portrayals, function as dynamic spaces where diverse translational practices occur, negotiating between the forward march of modernity and the persistent haunting of past traumas.

Shin's discussion focuses on the turbulent situation of economic depression and the upsurge of militant nationalism in 1930s Japan,

a historical period that witnessed increasingly complex politico-economic matrixes in Shanghai. Zhang brings us to 1930s Shanghai through the lens of the Chinese writer Mao Dun, whose novel *Midnight* provides a dynamic picture of both the collusion and competition between industrial and global finance capitals in Republican China. Zhang's essay resituates Mao Dun's representation of ferocious speculative battles between Chinese industrialists and agents of imperial powers within China's economic modernity and nation-building process. It argues that Mao Dun's portrayal of Shanghai challenges the notion that its modernity is merely an outcome of the global economic system. Instead, it illuminates a distinct socioeconomic framework with its own financial market, political landscape, and cultural atmosphere. In so doing, Mao Dun's novel offers new insights into the global (dis)order of the early twentieth century. Zhang's analysis further extends recent work that, to borrow Gayle Rogers' phrase, 'has emerged to recast modernism through [the] risk/futurity dynamic'. Its detailed examination of financial speculations in the Global South in the early twentieth century illustrates a fresh perspective from which to explore the relationship between financial modernity and global modernism.

If Japanese cities like Tokyo and Otaru and Chinese cities such as Shanghai grappled with the conflicts between tradition and modernity in 1930s literary representations, the city of Singapore appeared as an absent past that haunted colonial-era SingLit. Riordan reads Lim Boon Keng's *Tragedies of Eastern Life* (1927) and S. Rajaratnam's 'The Tiger' (1942) as examples of Singapore modernism, which 'produced Singapore from a geographical distance and in uncertain times'. This form of writing back, as Riordan puts it, involved both spatial circuitousness and temporal anachronism. While both writers and reformists 'drew on other spaces – hinterlands and heterotopias – to provide back stories for a global city', they also sought inspiration from their own pasts for their visions of Singapore's future. The complicated temporalities of these modern cities in Asia as depicted in early twentieth-century literature prompt us to reconsider the analytical significance of cultural sedimentations in the development of global modernist studies.

As Riordan shows us, Singapore stories are 'tales of arrivals and departures', conveying an 'inherent historical rootlessness'. Providing a bridge from the high modernism of the 1920s and 30s to the late, ahistorical modernism of the postwar (and contemporary) era, Riordan's paper anticipates Andrew Thacker's discussion of Teju Cole, whose 'uncertain new modernism' is similarly shaped by postcolonial

narratives of arrivals and departures. Like Riordan, Thacker borrows from both the architect Rem Koolhaas and the Marxist thinker Marshall Berman to help unravel the network of modernist influences on Cole's literary and photographic representations of Lagos in *Open City* (2011) and *Every Day Is For the Thief* (2007). Is Lagos the new modernist city of the twenty-first century? Thacker creates a necessary account of the 'multifaceted spatial stories of Lagos, and how they connect to a longer global history of urban modernity'. Indeed, for Thacker, Lagos 'represents a twenty-first century urban modernism of the now, with distinct connections to earlier forms of Western modernist cities, but with quite specific features due to its location as a postcolonial city of the Global South'. It is precisely this temporally expanded and geographically expansive global history of urban modernity that needs to be interrogated and unravelled in the context of modernist allegiances and influences.

Thacker's turn to contemporary photography in Cole's work is further developed in James Clifford Kent's essay on the Cuban photographer Raúl Cañibano and his near-documentarian portrayal of the city of Havana. Cañibano's capturing of the ever-evolving Cuban city is reminiscent, Kent shows us, of modernist representations of the city in times of crisis. Consistently in black and white, the only existing possible 'colour' for Cañibano, his work on Havana pays homage to the early twentieth century, and especially to the work of Spanish and Italian Surrealists. From them, Cañibano borrows the idea that photography could help to 'transcribe' and 'mediate' reality. Cañibano's contemporary re-appreciation of the modernist moment in photography extends the temporality of the cities in this issue, enabling us to consider early twentieth-century modernism's afterlife at the end of the century, and into the twenty-first.

The final paper in this special issue, by Matthew Beaumont, serves as a coda, examining not representations *of* the city in modernist literature but, rather, modernist literature *as* city, through readings of the work of Gillian Rose. Gathering Rose's 'scattered reflections on cities', with a focus on her 1993 inaugural lecture 'Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Three Cities', Beaumont examines the literary possibilities that inhere in Rose's enigmatic concept of 'the third city' or 'broken middle' that she identifies between Athens and Jerusalem, the rational versus the revelatory. The triune urbanism that Rose constructs, Beaumont argues, can be read as both a challenge to the dualistic nature of postmodernity and an affirmation of modernity. Yet if Beaumont returns us to the scene of high modernism through references to Joyce and Eliot, his discussion of Rose insists that we

reimagine the scenography, by locating modernist literature in a third, conceptual space, shaped by what Rose describes as 'the anxiety of modernity'.

This special issue begins in Asia, tracks through Africa and Latin America, and concludes (if notionally) in the Middle East – a trajectory that speaks to the geopolitical flux that has characterised the past century. If, in the early part of the twentieth century, the 'West' understood its Other to be the 'East' (an idea that would later shape the rhetoric of Cold War 'blocs'), then in our contemporary era that line has been redrawn along a north-south axis, as the prevailing terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' (a distinction first applied in 1969[13]) indicate. In closing with Beaumont's reflections on the broken middle, we think about the fate of Palestine, a crisis to which Rose's concept – and indeed her work more broadly – seems to speak powerfully.[14].

Concluding with Beaumont's discussion also suggests a way of thinking about the fate of literature in our troubled contemporary moment. Rose's Third City remains rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition, but Beaumont's recoding of it through modernist literature suggests something more expansive, something that might have wider application to the ways in which this special issue attempts to think cities of global modernism. Breaking from transatlantic narratives of modernity that have articulated this dichotomy (broadly) in terms of Western Europe (the industrial city) and North America (the consumer city), all of the papers in this special issue might be said to offer paradigms of the literary third city; broken middles that refuse to be absorbed into the dualistic structures of thought that have long shaped Western modernism.

Notes

1. Neal Alexander, *Late Modernism and the Poetics of Place* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 1. See also: Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998) and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Both of these accounts, contrary to their titles, also trouble the assumption that modernism ended abruptly with the onset of WWII.
2. For more on the cultural and economic implications of the global shift in tall building construction, see: Christopher Michaelson, 'History, Theory & Criticism: The Competition for the Tallest Skyscraper: Implications for Global Ethics and Economics' in *CTBUH Journal* No. 4 (2014), pp. 20–27.
3. Ian Goldin and Tom-Lee Devlin, *Age of the City: Why our Future will be Won or Lost Together* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), p.111.
4. For more on this see: Goldin & Devlin, *Age of the City*, pp. 109–129.

5. For more on twenty-first century global cities, see, among others: Pablo Baisotti (ed.), *New Global Cities in Latin America and Asia: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2022); Anne Haila, 'Globalising Asian Cities: Guest Editor's Introduction', *Urban Studies* 37 no. 11 (2000), pp. 2141–2143; Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio (eds.), *Cities in South Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); *Routledge Handbook on Middle East Cities*, ed. by Haim Yacobi and Mansour Nasasra (London and New York: Routledge, 2020); Ira M. Lapidus, *Middle Eastern Cities: A Symposium on Ancient, Islamic, and Contemporary Middle Eastern Urbanism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022). For more on neoliberal urbanism, see Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) and Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
6. Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2013), p. x.
7. Quoted in: Isabelle Campone, 'The new guard of Chinese architects is drawing the future of the country' in *Luxury Tribune*, 30 June 2022, <https://www.luxurytribune.com/en/the-new-guard-of-chinese-architects-is-drawing-the-future-of-the-country> [accessed 27 June 2024].
8. *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, ed. by Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 1. See also *The New Modernist Studies*, ed. by Douglas Mao (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), for a detailed account of the achievements and limitations of the expansion of the new modernist studies.
9. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 'Locating the Modern', in *Geographies of Modernism*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (London: Routledge, 2005), 3. Andrew Thacker returns on this question in his most recent book on the city, *Modernism, Space and the City: Outsiders and Affect in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and London* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), but this time considering the 'affective pull [. . .] exerted upon cultural producers by the four cities discussed in this book (Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London)' (p. 2).
10. Lise Jaillant and Alison E. Martin, 'Introduction: Global Modernism', in *Modernist Cultures*, 13.1 (2018), pp. 1–13 (p. 2).
11. Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross, 'Global Modernism: An Introduction and Ten Theses', in *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 9.
12. We would like to thank the British Academy for generously funding the hybrid conference entitled "Cities of Modernism", which resulted in this cluster of papers. The conference was held at the University of York on 17th May 2022 and co-organized by York and Fudan University (Shanghai).
13. Carl Oglesby, 'After Vietnam What?', in *Commonweal*, 90 (1969), p. 11.
14. The application of Rose's work to the Israel-Palestine conflict was first proposed by Marc H. Ellis in 1997. See: Marc H. Ellis, 'The Future of Israel/Palestine: Embracing the Broken Middle', in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 26:3 (1997), pp. 56–66.