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### *Bryan Robertson, abstract expressionism and late Modernism in Recent Australian Painting (1961)*

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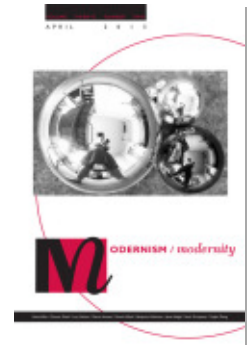
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## **Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s–1960s (review)**

Tanya Dalziell

Modernism/modernity, Volume 17, Number 1, January 2010, pp. 254-256  
(Article)

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What might emerge in that gap is, to move on to the final section of the book, the posthuman. Here two essays, Theodora Goss and Riquelme's on Mary Shelley and Octavia Butler, Paul K. Saint-Amour's on the concept of total war, ask what the Gothic has become or is becoming at the moment of writing. Goss and Riquelme certainly succeed in demonstrating that the preoccupations of early Gothic live on in various transmuted forms within the contemporary, with, for example, genetic engineering substituted for galvanism and with a constant wish for the emergence of a "third force" to break down old patterns of difference; Saint-Amour focuses on questions of suspense, speed, resolution, and postponement, taking the Gothic as a model for ways in which writers as diverse as Wilkie Collins, Conrad, and Woolf handle the "timing" of their readers and how war may figure as a "stopping-place" which is nevertheless never sufficient in itself but always bears traces of other realms, other possibilities.

This book is successful, interesting, and challenging, while reminding us highly opportunely of the involvement of the Gothic with present-day events and circumstances. But I have also to say that its value lies at least as much in its stimulus to further thought as in a rounded coherence of argument. But this, I would suggest, is itself valuable: in a time when easy answers are just as easily discredited while the horrors of war, starvation, economic inequality, and corporate greed continue and escalate, it may be that we need clear, and differently put, questions before we can move towards solutions or even towards further discussion. This book made me think: about what the Gothic might be, about what the modern might be, but most of all about what the relation between the human and the posthuman (and, I regret to say, also the "abhuman") might be, and thus about quite what kind of rough beast the strange barometer of Gothic is predicting and describing, on its path towards Bethlehem, to be (as we may equally hope and fear) born.

***Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s–1960s.* Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly, eds. Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 294. \$43.00 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Tanya Dalziell, The University of Western Australia**

A quick glance at a handful of recent Australian publications would suggest that there is a new interest in Australian modernity in the air. Ann Vickery's *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry* (2007) examines women's poetic careers in Australia during the early twentieth century; Jill Julius Matthews offers an account in *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (2005) of the ways in which modernity was negotiated as a series of everyday practices in Sydney during a similar time. *Marcus Clarke's Bohemia: Literature and Colonial Modernity in Melbourne* (2004) by Andrew McCann focuses on a particular author to throw into relief ideas of modernity within the bohemian turn-of-the-century literary culture of Melbourne as well as tracing the influence of non-Australian writers on Clarke's work. Anne Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad have brought together a number of Australian modernist source texts across various genres and forms in their anthology, *Modernism and Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967* (2006). In the recent *Cambridge History of Australia Literature* (2009), edited by Peter Pierce, Peter Kirkpatrick counsels in his overview of poetry, popular culture, and modernity from 1890 to 1950 that "we need to acknowledge that there are many ways of being modern," while Susan Lever, whose subject is Australian fiction since 1950, concurs with many other critics when she singles out Nobel Prize winner Patrick White as Australia's eminent "high modernist."<sup>1</sup> It

is within this context of renewed interest in all things modern in Australia that *Impact of the Modern* arrives.

This flurry of volumes concerned with “the modern” in Australia arguably says as much about “the modern” as it does about imaginings of Australia and its place in the (colonial, global) world. While Norman Lindsay (1879–1969) celebrated Australia’s geographical distance from Europe as a kind of buffer against what he perceived as the puerile influence of continental modernism, women’s magazines such as *The Home* (1920–1942) celebrated “the modern” in commodities, design, architecture, household furniture and music. The magazine featured contributions by artists including Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston, the latter mentioned in Kerry Heckenberg’s contribution to *Impact of the Modern*. An article published in *The Home* in 1929 reads: “It is most encouraging to find that it [“the modern”] appeals to Australians, and makes me feel that we are not so much in a backwater as some people think.”<sup>2</sup> This idea, which sees “the modern” as a desired import and denies Australia coevalness with apparent centres of cultural innovation, is rehearsed nearly thirty years later by the poet and critic Vincent Buckley. In a very different context, Buckley wrote in 1957 that: “We are not quite modern, as other literatures understand modernity. Yet we are on our way to being mature.”<sup>3</sup> These recent volumes, including *Impact of the Modern*, seek to examine, readjust, and overturn such apologetic, colonial-hued models of “the modern,” and indeed of “Australia”.

As the editors of *Impact of the Modern* explain, the nineteen (shortish) essays found in this book collectively, if not altogether consciously, address “the modern” and “the nation” by focusing expressly on “the modern vernacular as defined through Australian social knowledges, consumption patterns, economic and political initiatives, popular pastimes and cultural practices” (xix). It is an ambitious brief that first found life as a conference theme, and one that the volume as a whole encompasses with some success, even as, or perhaps because, the enduring tensions between “the nation” and “modernism” largely shape these contributions. The editors’ stated wish is for the book to present itself in terms of “a more outward-looking, internationalising phase of Australian studies” (xiii), one that moves away from frameworks based on nationalism, with their presumable inward focus. Yet the nation is not something that can be easily sidestepped when speaking about “the modern” in Australia.

In part, the volume implicitly tries to produce another vocabulary for speaking about modernity in postcolonial Australia (and beyond) in the twenty-first century, one that takes account of the difficulties that such a project entails. For this task, many of the contributors call upon what the editors describe (with an unacknowledged nod to modernity’s valorisation of the new) as “career biography—or prosopography—as a productive and highly accessible method of conceptualising new research in cultural history” (xix). It is questionable just how “new” such a research approach is or indeed what contours it might take; neither the editors nor the contributors discuss these details at any length. As a result, the chapters largely assume, rather than interrogate, such methods, and the results are often recuperative and certainly interesting, accounts of people and events now deemed to have pursued and advanced “the modern” in Australia and elsewhere. From the construction and use of Turkish baths and amusement parks to literary criticism, cinema, fine art, peepshow machines, dance, and epistolary partnerships, the volume’s thematic as well as temporal scope is expansive, arguably demonstrating the elasticity of “the modern” and its variants, and testing any claims that might be made for this term’s meaningfulness in an Australian context as an agreed upon period or aesthetic or indeed, as a marker of national maturity.

Eileen Chanin, for example, takes as her topic two travelling art exhibitions, one consisting of Australian art that was sent to the United States in 1931 and one that saw a collection of contemporary British art find its way to Australia in 1933, and “discusses circumstances surrounding them and their organisation” (137). Simon Pierse’s contribution similarly centers on the role art exhibitions play in promoting particular visions of the modern world, and Australia’s position

256 in it, some thirty years later than the two instances Chanin highlights. Melissa Bellanta draws attention to another form of travelling show, one that took place a century earlier and which was performed by the Davenport brothers, “the Western world’s most famous spiritual mediums at the time” (171). Bellanta suggests that these stage acts were important sites for debating the metaphysical concerns of the Enlightenment and for developing “popular alternatives to elite visions of modernity” in Australia (172).

Angela Woollacott’s essay utilises the “career biography” approach knowingly. Taking as her subject “the careers of three internationally successful ‘Australian’ performers of the early twentieth century,” Woollacott sets out “to raise questions about femininity, celebrity, race and Australianness” (185), with great effect. Amanda Card’s essay on Sonia Revid and other female dancers takes on similar concerns. Bill Case and Barbara Creed, in their chapters on the music of Harold Blair, an Aboriginal activist and singer, and Charles Chauvel’s film, *Jedda* (1955) respectively, consider how ideas and representations of the primitive, cultivated by colonial discourse and modernism alike (although not always with the same attitude), manifested in Australia in the 1950s and were linked with what it meant (largely for non-indigenous people) to be modern.

*Impact of the Modern* provides a series of entry points into “the modern” in an Australian context and as such, is a welcome complement to recent volumes on the immediate subject while offering much to the wider field of modernist studies.

## Notes

1. Peter Kirkpatrick, “‘New words come tripping slowly’: Poetry, popular culture and modernity, 1890–1950,” and Susan Lever, “The challenge of the novel: Australian fiction since 1950,” in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, ed. Peter Pierce (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 199 and 500.

2. Anon, “Modern Art in Window Display at David Jones,” *The Home* 10:9 (1929), 55.

3. Vincent Buckley, *Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1957), 25.

***Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia.* Ann Stephen, Philip Goad, and Andrew McNamara, eds. Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press in association with Powerhouse Publishing, 2008. Pp. xxxiii + 253. \$72.40 (paper).**

## Reviewed by Robert Dixon, University of Sydney

*Modern Times* follows an earlier collection of primary sources by the same editors and publisher, *Modernism and Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture, 1917–1967* (2006). In Australia it is accompanied by an eponymous travelling exhibition that opened at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, in August 2008, where Ann Stephen is curator. Reviewers of the earlier volume read it, incorrectly, as elaborating Bernard Smith’s received account of the Australian reception of modernism in *Australian Painting* (1962) as a series of belated, style-based shifts occurring discretely within painting, sculpture, design, and architecture. Accordingly, in their introduction to *Modern Times*, the editors stress that the essays collected here tell, “for the first time”, another, “untold” history of Australia’s informed engagement with modernism as an international, interdisciplinary project spanning five decades, from 1917 to 1967.

The twenty-five essays collected here deal with the popular reception of “modernism”—or “modernity”—in and range of media, including painting, architecture, design, fashion, photog-