

12-1-2023

Kate Armond, *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque*

Gabriela Minden
Cardiff University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jwls>

Recommended Citation

Minden, Gabriela (2023) "Kate Armond, *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque*," *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*: Vol. 11, Article 9.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jwls/vol11/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

A REVIEW OF MODERNISM AND THE THEATRE OF THE BAROQUE

BY KATE ARMOND

Reviewed by Gabriela Minden, University of Oxford

Kate Armond's *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque* (2018)¹ is less a study of influence than an exploration of the critical possibilities that arise in conjuring the specter of the baroque and using it as a lens through which to reassess various artistic phenomena of Anglo-American modernism. This choice of methodological framework is a wise one, as it allows Armond to shed the burden of proving causation and move on to the more sophisticated work of recovering what she aptly calls a "dialogue" between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries that is at once nuanced and compelling (7). As Armond acknowledges, this particular dialogue that modernism held with the past is not exactly unknown. Yet it represents an area in which scholars have continued to discover previously untrodden critical territory, evidenced not only by Armond's study but also by recent works such as Jane Stevenson's *Baroque Between the Wars: Alternative Style in the Arts, 1918–1939* (2018) and Joseph Cermatori's *Baroque Modernity: An Aesthetics of Theatre* (2021). *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque* constitutes a thought-provoking contribution to this facet of modernist studies. By reexamining a variety of early twentieth-century artistic phenomena in view of their affinity with theatrical and philosophical advances of the historical baroque, Armond illuminates what she describes as a "baroque aesthetic that runs counter to the dominant modernist values" promoted by central figures such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce (7).

The range of materials on which Armond draws to build this argument is broad and commendably interdisciplinary, encompassing modernist literature; epistolary correspondence; theories of dance, acting, and stagecraft; performance practices; and evidence of philosophical, historical, and social developments. This interdisciplinary approach enables Armond to interrogate how three different baroque "sources"—the German *Trauerspiel* (play of mourning), the monism of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the Italian commedia dell'arte—were "recreat[ed]" and harnessed to new aesthetic and political ends in a diverse selection of early twentieth-century arts (2018, 8). Over the course of six chapters, Armond unfolds how aspects of these seventeenth-century philosophical concepts and theatrical forms emerged, and were sometimes fundamentally recast, in the novels of Djuna Barnes and

Wyndham Lewis, the writings and choreography of the American dancer Isadora Duncan, and the theater theories of Edward Gordon Craig. Through perceptive and detailed comparisons, Armond makes a powerful case for her assertion that the modernist figures featured in her study were not simply “passive recipients of tradition,” but were rather extraordinarily “innovative, playful, and even irreverent in their reworking” of baroque sources (7).

The book’s chapters are arranged around key modernist figures, as well as forms and definitions that “allow the baroque to be used as a framework for analysing modernist achievements” (7). Following a brief introduction, the first chapter provides an overview of the main baroque sources on which Armond concentrates. The three ensuing chapters are all dedicated to Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), lending the novel a centrality for which Armond makes no apologies, justifying her decision by contending that *Nightwood* offers “the most detailed baroque vision captured by any modernist writer” (2018, 8). While at first glance this sustained engagement with *Nightwood* may seem to indicate a somewhat narrow focus, to hold this view would be to overlook the true scope and ambition of Armond’s study. Negotiating between detailed analysis and remarkably broad contextualization, Armond draws out the subtle connections between *Nightwood* and Walter Benjamin’s theories of seventeenth-century allegory, “creaturely” vocal utterances that evoke baroque perceptions of humankind’s affinity with the animalistic, Sitwellian interpretations of the cultural and political achievements of baroque sovereignty, and more (90).

These early chapters thus reveal the value of Armond’s complex methodology. Often, we find that the baroque sources on which Armond focuses did not have a direct bearing on their twentieth-century counterpart, but were rather mediated through a modern conduit. Barnes’s engagement with *Trauerspiel*, for instance, is understood through her exposure to the aesthetic developments of German expressionist theater, themselves consonant with aspects of *Trauerspiel*; similarly, Duncan is associated with Spinoza’s monism through her interest in Ernst Haeckel’s fin de siècle evolutionary science, itself indebted to Spinozan thought. Building up layers of contextual evidence that suggest some level of modern exposure to notions and forms that can be traced to the historical baroque, Armond skillfully weaves a web between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries that opens up her study to a wide range of rewarding explorations.

The later part of the fifth chapter and the sixth chapter of the book extend this intricate approach to recovering historical resonances. While these sections turn to Gordon Craig and Wyndham Lewis, two figures whose engagement with their seventeenth-century source—the commedia dell’arte—is more easily discernible, Armond nevertheless uses their familiarity with the genre to draw somewhat unexpected and generative parallels. This allows her to read Gordon Craig’s theory of the *Übermarionette* as a modern resurgence

of the dynamic and extemporaneous qualities of the commedia dell'arte, and to offer an illuminating reconsideration of the physicality of Lewisian satire, particularly as developed in *The Apes of God* (1930). Casting the novel's central figures as stock characters of the commedia dell'arte—Zagreus emerges as the clear Arlecchino, and the naive Dan Boleyn becomes Pierrot—Armond styles a “Commedia of the Apes” that underscores how Lewis's prose can be seen to offer a distinctive sense of embodiment and theatricality (2018, 140). As Armond eloquently phrases it, “While in the commedia performance, physical action was often swift, incisive and even athletic, Lewis displaces that energy, and it is not human bodies but the words on the written page that surprise and impress, performing feats of skill, changes of pace, unexpected flights, tumbles and tricks” (148). It is not only the characters but also inanimate objects and more that are shown to have physical impulses: in Armond's construal, even a clap of laughter seems to dance across the table (146). There is a renewed focus on satire's rendering of physicality, materiality, and exteriority that Armond sets against modernism's more familiar preoccupation with interiority and consciousness, gesturing to writers such as Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust (144). Armond's reading of *The Apes of God* thus lends weight to one of her study's most stimulating conclusions: that baroque modernism emerges as “an aesthetic of human embodiment” (161). At the same time, this commedia dell'arte parallel allows Armond to highlight the similarities between Lewis's treatment of the 1926 General Strike and the plight of the dispossessed in seventeenth-century Italy, augmenting the novel's cultural critique as well as its satiric effect.

Given the significance of Armond's innovative methodological framework—a major contribution of her study—it is perhaps inevitable that weaker parts of the book come when Armond strays from this framework and strives to establish influence for cases in which correspondence seems more probable. Some suggestions that modernist figures deliberately drew on baroque sources were less convincing, and indeed unnecessary for Armond's valuable analyses. Despite the breadth of the study, there are also a few areas that would have benefited from greater consideration of notable interconnections. For instance, while Armond is in many ways carving out space for a version of modernism counter to that which was animated by an interest in the classical world—evoking the late nineteenth-century distinction that Heinrich Wölfflin drew between classical and baroque art—it was nevertheless surprising to have chapter 5's discussion of Duncan, Gordon Craig, and Lewis vis-à-vis Hellenism, the physicality of modernist performance, the ritualistic dithyramb, and Jane Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) without a gesture to the extraordinary significance of Nietzschean thought. Finally, I would have welcomed more critical engagement with Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), particularly in light of the central role that it plays in Armond's argument.

These points are minor, however, and do not diminish Armond's study, which will provide its readers with a more nuanced and profound understanding of Anglo-American modernism while broadening their knowledge of the work of Barnes, Lewis, Duncan, and Gordon Craig. In Armond's hands, theatrical and philosophical advances of the seventeenth century emerge as forces of artistic renewal for a selection of the early twentieth-century's literary, theatrical, and choreographic developments. Most significantly, *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque* offers an expansive paradigm for considering the implications of artistic heritage, historical forms, and intermedial translation for modernist innovation. When set in the context of modernism, Armond suggests at the close of a pithy conclusion, the baroque "represents a way of mediating between past and present" (166). We might say the same about her study as well.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kate Armond, *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 192 pages.

REFERENCES

- Armond, Kate. 2018. *Modernism and the Theatre of the Baroque*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cermatori, Joseph. 2021. *Baroque Modernity: An Aesthetics of Theatre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stevenson, Jane. 2018. *Baroque Between the Wars: Alternative Style in the Arts, 1918–1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.