

**Pop Modernism - Noise and Reinvention of the Everyday.** By Juan A. Suárez, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2007, 336 pp., 10 b&w illus. ISBN 025-207-3924

Juan A. Suárez's *Pop Modernism - Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* is a critical refashioning of 'historical' and 'political' (271) conceptions of modernism. The book seeks to refute familiar, traditional accounts of modernist 'elitism' (2), instead preferring to demonstrate 'the embeddedness of modernism in popular culture' (2). Suárez rejects 'reductive' accounts of modernism that sought to characterize popular culture as anomalous, or as mere 'marginalia that had little bearing on aesthetics' (2). Instead, he undertakes a project of cultural and critical recovery. Decrying the absence in canonical modernism's now familiar history of 'the alternative perspectives of women, queers, and artists from the peripheries; the fascination with machinery, fashion, and cities; and the modernist immersion in pop life of the times' (2), *Pop Modernism* provides a critical reengagement with a number of largely overlooked American artists – ones that figured their practice in relation to the concerns and pressure of the everyday. *Pop Modernism* offers a contextual, theoretical analysis of modernism. Suárez aligns himself with those artists attempting 'to produce alternative figurations of desire, sociality, and subjectivity – to produce, in sum, a renewal of the quotidian' (22).

Drawing upon previous accounts of 'alternative' modernisms, Suárez demonstrates the manner in which 'avant-garde and modernist aesthetics often arose from a selective appropriation of popular expressive forms' (3). Divided into three discrete sections, this study articulates 'the evolution of a pop-orientated modernism in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century to the eve of pop art' (4). The key to understanding the structure of *Pop Modernism* resides in the subtitle of the book: noise. Noise, according to Suárez, designates 'nonsignifying matter' (8) in a variety of guises – verbal, visual, and aural. He argues that such nonsignifying matter 'is another name for the otherness that modernism, as an art of practice, discovered in the heart of the quotidian' (8). The presence of ungovernable noise in modernist texts, for Suárez, carries with it radical aesthetic and political implications, as '[h]ighlighting the nonsignifying in daily objects is a way of wrenching them out of the narratives that govern custom and use and steer our traffic through the world' (173). Suárez argues for those texts (*Pop Modernism* included) that register the presence of nonsignifying noise in the everyday, as 'a form of ideological critique that elides the social totality and subjectivity – usual entry points into the political – to recode the molecular aspects of the quotidian, where ideology does its work most unconsciously and persistently' (173).

Suárez's argument has a subversive dimension, as well as a surrealist element, for what is being proposed throughout *Pop Modernism* is a critical defamiliarization technique similar to



the surrealist recoding or re-enchantment of found objects. The critical impulse of *Pop Modernism* is made clear in moments of rhetorical flourish suggesting 'a plurality of strategies for practicing and inhabiting the immediate' (271). The tripartite structure of *the book* should be understood in this occasionally overwrought context 'where systemic imperatives jam against the intricacy of lived experience' (271). The first of these sections – 'Noise Abatement' – comprises three separate studies of American modernists whose relationship with the 'noise' generated by popular culture and everyday life was either one of ambiguity and anxiety or, as in more extreme cases, of outright fear and rejection. The nonsignifying motif of the opening section of *Pop Modernism* is of a visual variety. Drawing upon the cinematic theories of poet Vachel Lindsay (Chapter One), Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's film *Manhatta* (Chapter Two), and the filmic camera eye utilized by John Dos Passos in the fictional *USA* (Chapter Three), Suárez argues for a 'conception of modernity as a milieu of perceptual scattering and shock, dominated by unanchored visual stimuli and floating signs and driven by unprecedented speed' (21-22). This milieu is epitomized by the rapid movement of the visual cinematic realm and the process of film editing, 'the cinema replicated the experience of modernity in condensed form' (22). Throughout the opening section of *Pop Modernism*, Suárez conveys how the 'intrinsic functioning' of the visual, cinematic image 'tended to increase the strangeness of the material world and the speed of contemporary life, and therefore to add up to the confusion of a world without center, guarantees of order' (22).

Given that Suárez argues that the noisy, visual modernist realm 'was also an environment in which objects became humanized and harbored unsuspected latencies' (22) of previously obscured forms of alterity, it is unsurprising that the American modernists of *Pop Modernism's* first section elicit the author's sustained criticism. For instance, Suárez writes of the manner in which Lindsay's 'conservative' (22) cinematic agenda sought to neutralize 'what he saw as the incoherent modern milieu and the disintegrating potential of film' (22) in favour of 'traditional high culture' (22). Following on, the rendering of visual imagery in Strand and Sheeler's film *Manhatta* is criticized as 'intent on exorcizing heterogeneity in favor of uniformity reminiscent of the flatness of precisionist painting or the geometry of skyscraper architecture' (73). Dos Passos's use of popular mass media is analyzed by Suárez in a similar fashion: 'One way to read the juxtapositions of modes and techniques in *USA* is to consider them as attempts to bring under control the disorder of the Newsreels' (97). What is important to grasp in this section of *Pop Modernism* is that no matter how much the modernists in question may privilege coherence and order, analysis (Suárez is here specifically writing of Lindsay) of the cinematic image will always speak of 'hybridity, complexity, and promiscuity and re-creates the unmanageability of objects and the vectors of acceleration that inform commercial culture and everyday life' (22). Inevitably, despite the best efforts contained in high-minded modernist texts – Dos Passos's *USA*, for instance – to staunch the flow of nonsignifying noise and matter stemming from popular forms of culture, 'everyday noise –



Suárez writes – embodies the internal dissension, the opaque sublimity that prevents the work from fulfilling its avowed purpose of renewing language and making sense out of the quotidian cacophony’ (104). Nevertheless, such an attempt differentiates traditional modernists from what Suárez distinguishes as modernism’s ‘other’ avant-gardes, those who excavated the sources of noise whilst appearing ‘unsettling and disorientating, the bearers of secret histories and latencies that disrupt, in a variety of ways, the narratives of modernity and the linear trajectories of modernism’ (115).

Before Suárez’s study is able to outline the forms of quotidian renewal privileged by the modernist ‘others’ who ‘do not provide stable platforms of revolt or models of authenticity’ (115), however, *Pop Modernism* takes a detour through ‘The Rustle of the Quotidian.’ In this section, Suárez turns his critical attention toward T.S. Eliot (Chapter Four) and Joseph Cornell (Chapter Five). The emphasis placed on nonsignifying matter in this portion of *Pop Modernism* is both visual (Cornell) and aural (Eliot). In Suárez’s estimation, modernists like Eliot and Cornell occupy ambiguous critical positions. Due to the presence of new sources of noise, Cornell’s found-object boxes and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* register how ‘these frequencies modified everyday perceptions and jammed the literature switchboard, powerfully reshaping conceptions of writing, subjectivity, discourse, and cultural hierarchy’ (121). Suárez’s decision to build his argument around Eliot’s resolutely ‘high’ modernist *The Waste Land* is initially perplexing. Suárez attempts to avoid ‘the usual hermeneutic’ (123) debates surrounding *The Waste Land*’s formal construction and meaning by performing ‘a surface exploration of its textual mechanics’ (123). In other words, ‘[t]he point is not to discover *what* but *how* the poem signifies’ (123). Suárez outlines how Eliot’s writing mimics and responds to the ‘voice media’ (132) that are often the sources of unintelligible, non-signifying noise which ‘fragment the organic wholeness of oral and written communication’ (132). The radio is one such example and, according to Suárez, the text of *The Waste Land* replicates the mechanistic functioning of the turning dial as ‘Eliot’s poem zaps through a sort of prerecorded literary archive that seems to be kept on the air at different frequencies’ (132).

Matters are complicated by Eliot’s famous emphasis on tradition. In Suárez’s formulation, however, the poet of *The Waste Land* ‘himself is the tuning dial here, or else a disc jockey that delights in creating such mosaics of sound and language’ (133). Developing the aural analogy, Suárez argues that ‘[t]ogether with the voices of tradition, automatic receivers pick up noise as well: the communication channels often hiss with static, the sound may be garbled, and the gramophone needle may skip’ (133-134). The disorder of popular culture and ordered tradition are ‘faithfully transcribed’ (134) by Eliot, and reside in an uneasy, unresolved relationship in poems like *The Waste Land*. Suárez notes the presence of a similar aesthetic operation in the work of Joseph Cornell. For Suárez, ‘[l]ike in Eliot or even in Dos Passos, in Cornell we have again the artist as recorder, only here what is taken down is how the raw



materials of experience connect through the artist, who acts as a registering surface' (145). What distinguishes Cornell from earlier modernists like Dos Passos and Eliot is, however, the 'purposefully opaque' (151) dimension of his art. Unlike the desire for order in the face of encroaching noise of his high modernist forebears, '[t]he active viewing Cornell's works encourage is not geared toward revolutionary enlightenment but toward semiotic drift' (158). In other words, Cornell's films and works 'capture incongruous details that generate indeterminacy and limit their readability' (158). Suárez argues that Cornell 'refuses to filter out' (161) the forms of nonsignifying matter contained in the detritus of popular culture that comprise his work. In doing so, Suárez gestures toward not only the ambiguous treatment of popular materials in early twentieth century art, but also paves the way for their outright embrace and appropriation by dissident urban aestheticians.

The final section of *Pop Modernism* – 'The Murmur of Otherness' – details the attempted renewal of the quotidian in the work of lesser known modernist figures like Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler (Chapter Six), Zora Neale Hurston (Chapter Seven), and James Agee, Janice Loeb, and Helen Levitt (Chapter Eight). Whereas previous chapters of Suárez's study chart the anxiety caused by the presence in modernity of 'an automatic multiplication of objects, an uncontrollable warp of meaningless matter' (173), the studies in the closing section of *Pop Modernism* provide illuminating juxtapositions of rarified aesthetic experimentalism and unruly forms of popular cultural matter. Ford and Tyler's novel *The Young and Evil* is representative of what Suárez identifies as a hybrid aesthetic form, and '[i]n this respect it is a work of high modernism and a subcultural text, part experimental and part popular' (181). The controversial sexual content of *The Young and Evil* serves a further purpose, however: it reveals Suárez's investment in delineating 'the interface between modernism and the forms of popular textuality arising from queer subcultural practice' (181). Suárez situates Ford and Tyler's novel in an urban social space 'where normality was suspended, where alliances between social, racial, and sexual others created something akin to what we would call a queer polity based on a common fringe identity' (181-182). Ultimately, Suárez comes to decry what he sees as Ford and Tyler's 'insistence on the potential for violence and disintegration in queer desire' (204) in *The Young and Evil*. Subsequently, 'only the negative, dissolving potential is present: the art of coming apart, not the capacity for social reconstruction' (204) is emphasized in Ford and Tyler's collaborative novel.

Suárez's self-alignment with subcultural politics informs his perspective towards the intentionally challenging and provocative *The Young and Evil*. Quick to label Ford and Tyler's radical juxtapositions of form and cultural material as an attempt 'to sketch out an archeology for the contemporary mixings of high and low art for the queer matrix of postmodern textuality' (207), Suárez turns his critical focus on the ethnographic works of Zora Neale Hurston. If Suárez's treatment of Ford and Tyler hinges upon prioritizing gender at the expense of race



(he fails to mention Ford and Tyler's somewhat problematic appropriation of African American 'rhythms' in the little magazine *Blues*), the opposite can be said of his study of Hurston. Suárez notes how 'Hurston repeatedly emphasized the hybrid character of black popular expression, which was distinguished in part by its ability to rework and make its own a great variety of styles, characters, icons, and fashions' (213). Black popular expression is, for Suárez, informed by resolute fluidity, constantly open to rewriting and appropriation. Texts like Hurston's *Tell My Horse* forego 'wholeness, closure, and transparency' (228), preferring instead to 'embrace isolated intensities' and foreground 'their opaqueness and irreducibility' (228). Remaining at all times attendant to cultural 'otherness' in her alternative ethnographic studies, Hurston appeals to Suárez. This is evident when the latter rather casually refers to the fact that '[w]e need, today more than ever, to rethink the imperialistic gesture of imagining others as others ... and here is where Hurston may be a great help: with her awareness of an inassimilable element in culture, a sublime object that resists translation and epistemic closure' (236).

*Pop Modernism* closes with a study of James Agee, Janice Loeb, and Helen Levitt's film *In the Street*. Suárez praises the quasi-surreal documentary technique of *In the Street* as 'an automatic recording device that does not discriminate between sense and nonsense, information and noise' (241). Suárez's analysis of *In the Street* also serves as a neat reiteration of *Pop Modernism*'s varied and wide-ranging discussions of American modernism: 'the fascination with urban spaces and street life, the use of ready-made materials ("found" people and scenes), an ethnographic interest in the quotidian, and a surrealist eye for discovering unsettling undertows in its midst' (241).

Having embarked on a critical search to delineate an extensive range of primary source materials – themselves often neglected in earlier studies of American modernism – Suárez concludes by attempting to order all his chosen texts under the rubric of the quotidian. Suárez's desire to realign his chosen mixture of forgotten texts of alternative, sexually non-normative, and ethically focused examples of alternative modernism within the contested critical sphere of the quotidian carries with it a host of well known political implications. Drawing upon Michel de Certeau, Suárez notes: 'The everyday is, after all, a fraught terrain; it is where we make ourselves at home in the world, where the political becomes personal, ideologies are adapted to individual conditions, and where wide-ranging, global changes percolate into the here and now' (270). Underpinning the critical framework of *Pop Modernism*, such a realignment is occasionally problematic. To his credit, Suárez admits as much when, for example, considering Eliot's high modernist *The Waste Land*. More significantly, Suárez diminishes his argument somewhat when rhetorically insisting on the 'global changes' implied by a consideration of the quotidian, changes hitherto largely unmentioned in *Pop Modernism*. Suárez is surely correct in arguing for the presence of non-



signifying noise in the literature of the everyday, characterized as 'an elusive horizon, always in motion, and therefore difficult to map – a constant source of disturbance and instability' (270). However, the static wrought by interruptions of rhetorical noise in Suárez's *Pop Modernism* is distracting when attempting to map the everyday realm – which has already been described by Suárez as decidedly elusive and contested. The strength of *Pop Modernism* resides, rather, in the informed textual considerations of American modernism, where Suárez gainfully attempts to 'recast somewhat the image of modernism and to connect recent forms of cultural practice with analogous ones in the early decades of the twentieth century.' Ultimately, even an unfortunate tendency toward political over-simplification – as in Suárez's reference to how '[m]acropolitics has been undergoing an unprecedented crisis of legitimation since at least May 1968' (271) – and rhetorical flourish should not detract from the manner in which *Pop Modernism* strives to demonstrate that '[f]rom its beginnings, modernism tried to make good the promise of a better life contained in the objects, spaces, and images of modernity, in noise, and in the energies of unassimilated others' (271).

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