

Introduction

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The “New” Modernist Cuisine?

Is modernism an artifact of the past, to be studied from an ever-increasing distance, or is it an ongoing cultural project that one can still experience firsthand? Although the defining characteristic of modernist studies since the Modernist Studies Association’s foundation has been a dramatic expansion of the field, few would argue that modernist art is still being produced. That, however, is what Nathan Myhrvold, formerly Microsoft’s chief technology officer, Chris Young, and Maxime Bilet claim in their tour de force cookbook *Modernist Cuisine* (2011). Developed over five years and aided by a team of chefs lead by Young and Bilet, the book sprawls over 2,400 pages, amasses six volumes, weighs forty pounds—and retails for \$625.¹ *Modernist Cuisine* is as much manifesto as cookbook, aiming not only to document the scientific cuisine of chefs like molecular gastronomy pioneer Ferran Adrià as well as Heston Blumenthal and Grant Achatz but also to instruct both professional and home cooks in the adoption of these techniques. For Myhrvold, the “modernist” in *Modernist Cuisine* is no mere marketing gimmick: the first volume opens with a history of cooking and art that situates his project as the inheritor of the artistic revolutions that began with Impressionism and grew into the various avant-garde movements that upended artistic traditions in literature, visual art, performance, and architecture—everything, in fact, *except food*.² Nearly “all of the cultural revolutionaries who launched these movements,” they claim, “ate very conventional food. It is truly striking that Modernism . . . never touched on cuisine.”³

Myhrvold and his coauthors choose the term “Modernist” to signal their radical break with culinary traditions.⁴ Previous developments in haute cuisine like Nouvelle and the New International movement were “evolutionary rather than revolutionary,” but what they understand as “Modernism” in cuisine,

is the revolution we are in now. We call it the Modernist revolution because its themes and driving forces are similar to Impressionism, the Bauhaus, and other Modernist avant-garde movements . . . The act of upending culinary conventions allows chefs to engage with diners in powerful ways. When tradition is found in the new cuisine, it is generally as a rhetorical foil, highlighting the contrast between the old and the new in deconstruction.⁵

Modernist Cuisine advocates an “intellectual” approach to cooking that disrupts diners’ preconceptions by pursuing the “higher goal” of shocking them into thinking about the possibilities of food in a new way.⁶

The vision of modernism that Myhrvold and his coauthors invoke stands at odds with much of the work in this book and, indeed, the past three decades of work in modernist studies. Their glossy tome evokes many of the old standard battery of modernist tropes—rupture, revolution, difficulty, elitism, technology, genius—that largely guided scholarship from the New Critics until late 1990s, when the Modernist Studies Association was formed to address the “sometimes scathing reappraisals of what was still called ‘High Modernism.’”⁷ While *Modernist Cuisine’s* aesthetic goals are laudable and its technical achievements impressive, the book nevertheless opens itself to similar criticisms that were leveled against modernism, especially its elitism. As Michael Ruhlman points out in his *New York Times* review of *Modernist Cuisine*, “Much of the cooking requires ingredients most people haven’t heard of and equipment few can even afford. A rotary evaporator costs thousands of dollars. A not atypical recipe step reads ‘Cavitate in an ultrasonic cleaning bath for 30 minutes.’ . . . [This book] is not for home cooks.”⁸ While Ezra Pound might approve of *Modernist Cuisine’s* insistence on precision and control (such as recipes that measure ingredients to one one-hundredth of a gram) and T. S. Eliot might nod along with their claim that “Culinary rules, conventions, and traditions must be understood” but also surpassed to “engage diners and make them think about the dining experience,”⁹ any narrative about modernism and food that fetishizes such outdated high modernist

tropes and rhetoric—and especially one that has benefited from such hype, money, and media coverage—must be challenged.

As *Modernism and Food Studies* attests, modernists paid much more attention to food than Myhrvold's book acknowledges. For instance, the authors seem unaware of *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Salvador Dali's *Les diners de gala*, or F. T. Marinetti's *Futurist Cookbook*, each of which is analyzed extensively in our volume as artifacts of modernist engagements with cooking, cuisine, and the cookbook as a literary genre. The latter two texts in particular antedate the stated intentions of Myhrvold's offering to "[upend] culinary conventions." As contributor Sean Mark explains in our volume, the Italian Futurists reveled in publicity, glorified theatricality, and chased the heroic fantasy of enlightening Italy's unimaginative dining public through novel applications of technology. Graig Uhlin explores how, drawing upon Dali's cuisine, surrealist filmmakers sought to disrupt bourgeois values by severing food from its nutritive function; and Asiya Bulatova demonstrates that to use cuisine as a method of defamiliarization *at all* is to summon Viktor Shklovsky's foundational modernist strategy of *ostranenie* ("estrangement"). To omit these references perpetuates an erroneous historical vacuum. As our authors demonstrate, modernist texts, authors, and artists were just as engaged with food as they were with all other social phenomena.

But more importantly, our collection pushes back against the recent unearthing in popular food discourse of the outdated and objectionable assumption that "modernist" means "exclusive." Perhaps few will read *Modernist Cuisine* for its historical account of the various and contradictory movements that we have come to understand as "modernist." It nevertheless tells a striking story of an avant-garde elite who dares to shock refined and mass tastes alike through their revolutionary artistic experiments—precisely the story that the last three decades of modernist studies has worked so hard to move beyond. Susan Stanford Friedman reflects upon shifting attitudes toward modernism as a movement, noting that for English graduate students in the 1960s, "Modernism was rebellion. Modernism was 'make it new.' Modernism was resistance, rupture. To its progenitors. To its students. Modernism was the antidote to the poison of tradition, obligation."¹⁰ By the 1990s, when postmodernism had gained its cultural foothold, "Modernism was elitism . . . the Establishment. 'High Culture' lifting its skirts against the taint of the 'low,' the masses, the popular. . . . To its Po-Mo descendants, Modernism is the

enemy. Postmodernism is the antidote to the poison of tradition, obligation.”¹¹ Against both reductive silos, the new modernist studies, as Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz argue, has expanded the field vertically and horizontally: vertically by questioning the “boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture,”¹² and horizontally by engaging with postcolonial theory and exploring “affiliations within and across national spaces” to “make modernism less Eurocentric.”¹³

Modernism and Food Studies calls for the establishment of an inclusive, nuanced, and responsible modernist food studies. Studying the intersection of modernism and food will continue to widen the field’s analytical terrain as well as affirm the value of inclusivity. Food concretely links the vertical and horizontal expansion of the field, providing a rich site for investigating new historical, political, and temporal questions. Though it has recently shed its own second-class status in the academy as a “low” concern, food also dismantles high/low binaries, unsettles social distinctions, and promotes alternative economies. To facilitate new work in these and other directions, *Modernism and Food Studies* has assembled theoretically and methodologically diverse essays—from Aimee Gasston’s feminist consideration of eggs in Katherine Mansfield’s oeuvre to Céline Mansanti’s historicist periodical study of American newspaper coverage of Futurist cuisine—that investigate modernist representations of food, broadly treated in phases from production to distribution and consumption. As a vital site of cultural concern, food is a crossroads linking a number of perennial modernist subjects: aesthetics, authenticity, commodification, empire, gender, interiority, mass production, politics, tradition, and others. Our contributors demonstrate the value of exploring new avenues within them.

Modernism and Food Studies also arranges new networks between seemingly disparate spaces, cultures, and artistic practices. Because the twentieth century saw the rise of the first truly globalized food chains, the scope of our collection necessarily follows the field’s “transnational turn,” with chapters on texts from Italy, Russia, and New Zealand to France, Ireland, and the Indian subcontinent. While some essays explore the connections, both textual and material, between modernism and global food networks, others operate within national borders, like Jessica Martell’s chapter on James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Carrie Helms Tippen’s reading of William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, especially because the increased availability of once-exotic imports often increased public demand for “authentic” or representative national foods. Additionally, several essays take up

postcolonial concerns by exploring the effects of cross-cultural contact enabled by global systems of production, as in Matthew Hayward's study of English commodities in the Irish market and Brooke Stanley's examination of famine and globalization in the work of Bengali writer Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. Furthermore, our selection of texts is intended to reenergize the study of canonical modernists like Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, and Salvador Dalí in new contexts while advocating for the prominence of less central figures like Marcel Rouff and Alice B. Toklas in the study of the cultural impact of modern food systems.

This collection contributes to the ongoing project of expanding the terrain of food studies to include not only more diverse objects of analysis but also more diverse methodologies and epistemologies. As Colin Anderson, Jennifer Brady, and Charles Levoke write, "If critical learning for social transformation are core goals of food studies, then it is essential that food studies scholars engage more deeply with some of the more transgressive and provocative areas of theory and research emerging from areas such as queer theory, fat studies, critical race theory, and gender studies."¹⁴ The chapters in this volume promote this goal by applying critical methodologies and insights from cultural and literary theory to figurations of food, famine, industry, hospitality, and even waste in modernist works. Literary texts are especially generative in this context, as Allison Carruth argues, because of their ability "to shuttle between . . . symbolic and embodied expressions of power. Just as importantly, literature has a facility with shifting from macroscopic to intimate scales of representation that can provide an incisive lens on the interactions between local places and global markets."¹⁵ *Modernism and Food Studies* thus underscores the importance of humanities scholarship to acts of social transformation. It may be the material reality of food that determines privilege, inequality, immiseration, but the cultural work around it—attitudes, perceptions, fantasies, beliefs, aesthetics, representations—is as much, if not more than, a determinant for what is produced, who has access to it, and what can or will change.

Toward a Modernist Food Studies

If J. Michelle Coghlan could claim in 2015 that "food matters, whether in the gastronomical or agricultural sense, were, until very recently, largely taken to be altogether beyond—or, rather, beneath—modernism's artistic purview," the ensuing years have not yet evinced the sustained research