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# From Peripheral to Alternative and back: Contemporary Meanings of Modernity

**Abstract:** Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of the contemporary as that which inscribes itself in the present through a disjunction or anachronism, this essay discusses contemporary meanings of modernity by looking at the way in which non-synchrony and dis-placement can be used as instrumental approaches to rethinking the dominant Eurocentric approach to a progressive, Northern-based idea of the modern. Peripheral, alternative, global, transnational, and even “bad” modernities have been concepts wrangled by cultural theory to come to terms with the trials of hegemonic modernity. The paper will discuss some of these attempts at redefining the modern and ask what they mean, whose voice they convey, and from whence they are spoken. It will then argue in favour of a revision of the peripheral as a productive category to frame an aesthetics of the (in)actual, drawing attention to the disjunction at the heart of the contentious idea of the modern in a few Iberian examples (e.g. Fernando Pessoa and Amadeo Souza Cardoso). This is particularly important for rethinking an artistic-based epistemology of the South, particularly from the standpoint of Iberian discourse.

**Keywords:** modernity, modernism, peripheries

## 1 The blank page

I start with a subheading borrowed from Susan Gubar’s feminist essay “The Blank Page” to reflect on the blankness that comes from a body racked by over-incision (1981, 255). The blankness of the modernist page does not refer to a lack but to an overload of definitions, critical discourses, incisions that cut the skin and lay bare the over-inscribed body of a field that has in fact been contaminated by the newness it seeks to absorb. This bloody body incised down to the bone has been dressed in many contradictory robes. The idea of the modern defines both a process and an attitude that can never be fully accomplished. The presence of the modern across ages, territories, fields, and disciplines rightfully suggests that we may never be fully modern,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that the volition, the injunction to be

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to distinguish this contention from Alain Finkielkraut’s assertion (2005) that we have never been modern, as it derives from a revisionism that disavows the contribution of enlight-

modern, is pervasive and persistent. There is a “rage for modernity,” as Dilip Gaonkar contends (2001, 21). And yet, because, it can never be fully thought through to its completion, the modern cannot be fully experienced. This is its allure and its tragedy.

But how necessary is it to be modern, Alain Finkielkraut (2005) asks? At what cost, under what circumstances, and to whose advantage? To address contemporary meanings of modernity means to address this “changing same” (Grossberg 2006, 259) under the current conjuncture, it requires returning to the “why”s, the “when”s, and the “whose”s of the modern endeavour,<sup>2</sup> while paying due credit to those who have mulled over the meanings, the modes, the agency of both modernity and modernism. The field, as I said, is overblown with incision.

Thus, the newness that enters the world with each new incision is often periphrastic or radically oblivious. What is in fact new in a field such as New Modernist Studies,<sup>3</sup> or is it rather an approach that encompasses the discussion about the distinct and yet deeply intimate concepts of modernity and modernism? How different are they from the Old Modernists? If “modernity” is a contentious term, there is arguably nothing more contentious than the periphrastic “New Modernist.” The term, which refers to the global shift in modernist research, places the New Modernist in a position of double denial: a negation of Eurocentrism in both time and geography. And yet, both Old and New Modernist Studies scholars find themselves before similar challenges, namely coming to terms with the impact of societal modernization in life experience and the manifold ways in which the struggle over existence under these conditions is articulated with creative disruption, often through the subversion of dominant art practices that is at the core of (trans)cultural modernities.

Just like Gubar’s blank page, another literary allegory is perhaps in order. One is keenly aware of one of Jorge Luís Borges’s characters, Ireneo Funes, the Uruguayan gaucho who could not forget a single thing. Applied to the wider pro-

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ened reasoning to a structural transformation of the societal *habitus* in the wake of the socio-political transformations at the end of the eighteenth century. Rather, I insist that the modern has, through thick and thin, been continuously a practice of ambivalence that draws on the ritual, the authoritarian, the popular, and the superstitious, just as it acknowledges science and reason, emancipation and freedom.

2 See, for instance, Raymond Williams in his 1987 lecture “When Was Modernism?” (Williams 1989), revised by critic Geta Kapur (2000). She considers the specific Modernism of the Indian art system. See also Harry Levin’s diagnostic “What Was Modernism?” in his article for the *Massachusetts Review* (Levin 1960).

3 See Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms* (2006, 1–8). The designation usually refers to “an impetus to ‘revitalize a field that had fallen into disfavour’” (Wollaeger 2012, 7), mainly by drifting away from Eurocentric highbrow modernism.

cess of modernity, Funes's "long insomnia," as Borges put it, clearly defines the state of the art in a field that, albeit obsessed with the new, with ruptures, gaps, and dislocations, is nonetheless haunted by the memory of contested beginnings and obsessed with innovative appropriation. The long insomnia of New Modernist research is thus placed before the paradox of the denial of origin and the drive to return, of starting, innovating, generating and being obsessed with borrowing, mixing, hybridizing, appropriating. Beatriz Sarlo writes in her book from 1988, *Modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920–1930*, that cultural work is a practice of looting, drawn from the impulse of honouring, mimicking, copying, stealing, denying, envying, subverting, and contradicting. What these ambivalent structures demonstrate is that modernity and the underlying notion of the modern are deeply troubled by the anxiety of naming, beginning, with concerns over spatial boundaries, forms of mediation, power discourses, and issues of agency.

So let us start where it all began, with a name, which, as we have learnt from the Adamic narrative, is also a form of wielding power, of setting the territory and producing an episteme. The name is a symptom!

## 2 The modern as symptom

There are as many modernities as words shall exist to shape them. "Modernity" is an inexact word (Ramalho Santos and Ribeiro 2008, 2) that seems to require a supplement to fulfil its meaning-making mandate, arguably because the term addresses the aporia of unaccomplished time, displaying the sought-for but continuously denied desire to capture the fleeting moment while seeking to expand the territory. Indeed, modernity both as a process and as a chronotopic concept seems to fall short of words, despite the abundance of designations at hand. The list of contemporary terms to designate the modern is effectively long and disparate: "Eurocentric modernity," "high modernity," "singular modernity," "unaccomplished modernity," "reflexive modernity," "contra-modernity," "settler modernity," "postcolonial modernity," "reactionary modernity," "cosmopolitan modernity," and then, graphed in the plural form, "multiple modernities," "translocal and transnational modernities," "alternative modernities," "primitive modernities," "peripheral modernities." This changing same disrupts both location and time. First, as Lawrence Grossberg contends (2010, 459), the concept displays a vernacular abundance speaking to differently situated experiences (gender, region, age, class), while resiliently holding on to the promise of creation, emancipation, progress, and preservation across different geographies.

Then, there is time. From the standpoint of chronology, the very idea of the modern presents the failure of history, the move to denounce the past and hold on to a now paradoxically felt as past and passing. As Andreas Huyssen insightfully claims, the modern is embedded within the trauma of the present past, which renders null the dream of a present future (2003, 11). Time-wise, then, it seems modernity can only be uttered in a pre- or postmodern mode, as an unaccomplished process doomed to be carried away by the breeze of progress like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History looking back at a pile of rubble.

Furthermore, the failure of the historical concept and its universalizing claims has lain in certain hegemonic discourses that reify the modern as a privilege of Western rationality, disseminated from a European centre across the imaginary waiting rooms of history (Chakrabarty 2000, 8). And yet, in the wake of a counter-hegemonic critique of Western rationality, be it from the standpoint of postcolonial subjectivity, gender, and new race critique, it was precisely the critical drive at the core of the modernity project that led to the conceptual instruments with which to denounce the West's volition to control the now it so desperately sought to own. In this ambivalent game, the intellectual critique at the core of the European progressive movement triggered the process through which the tropes of Western modern advancement – industrialization, secularization, and rationalization – have been questioned and disputed as indicators of universal validity.

It is thus that Homi Bhabha conceives of a “contra-modernity” to qualify the post-colonial as a stage that both mimics and subverts hegemonic Western modernity (1994, 173), or Susan Stanford Friedman argues in favour of “polycentric modernities” unpacking the Eurocentric narrative and enlarging the geographical scope of the endeavour (2008, 15). Notwithstanding, delocalization seems to be strikingly marked by a certain spatial imaginary that, as Peter Brooker and Andrew Tacker contend, may be highly debatable. Just as decolonization enlarges the geographical frame to be more inclusive, it also smuggles in a drive for situatedness that is increasingly allowing identitarian strategies to seep in and in turn question comparative cultural approaches that may unlock the conceptual frame of national borders.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the articulation of space with the somewhat contentious time-centred concept of the modern was driven by an inclusive intent that had at its core the sense that “the centre could not hold.” This effectively undergirded claims for the decentring of the modern and its splitting up into “pe-

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<sup>4</sup> Yet we would not take the argument as far as Brooker and Thacker do when claiming that “to examine modernism within the spatial framework of geography might seem perverse or, even in some ways, reactionary” (2005, 1). A geographical argument per se cannot be simply equated with hegemonic control. This would be a rather naive perception of geography's complex discourses.

ripheral modernities” (Sarlo 1988) or into the polycentric modernities of Latin America and Asia, as Susan Friedman discusses (2008, 15). The call for situatedness rests on the critique of a certain philosophical universalism of the modern, while deriving its impulse precisely from this very same ambition of emancipation.<sup>5</sup> And yet, one must be careful not to fall into a new essentialism by reifying location and promoting certain forms of cultural nationalism. Clearly, what is at stake here is the need to disrupt “modernity” both as a holistic cultural-political construct and as a sign of hegemonic coevalness shifting Europe’s Others to the borders of time.

Although the distinction between modernity as a socio-political construct and modernism as its aesthetic-cultural counterpart seems to be widely consensual, the neat separation between the two terms is not uncontentious, as the cultural does not exist beyond social framing and nor does the political occur beyond the aesthetic exploits of artists. Raymond Williams embraced the distinction for reasons that were at once analytical and political. Criticizing the narrowness of the modernist canon for its elitist Eurocentredness, Williams does not object to modernist objects per se, but to their reification as representative of the movement’s totality (1989, 78). Thus, he argues not so much against modernism as a general approach as for a recovery of the modern from the ideologically constrained category of the modernist.

The gap between the two terms is addressed by Adornian aesthetics, particularly through the claim that modernism reflects modernity’s critical self-awareness. The assertion, though, seems to bring more problems than results for a complex mapping of the concept, for it seems to suggest that modernism bears a privilege of critical reasoning that is absent from the whole concept of the modern. This is what Rebecca Walkowitz refers to as a perverse cosmopolitanism of sorts that fights the false communal universalism of a certain strand of modernism through an obstinate incorrectness, allowing cultural modernity to be reversely appropriated by alternative cultural practices (Walkowitz 2006, 13) and thus constructing modernism as a continuously brewing “adversary culture” to the structure of modernity itself (Huyssen 2005, 7). In fact, the stress put on modernist critical antagonism seems to reflect the passion for denial that Antoine Compagnon has defined as one of the paradoxes of modernity (2003, 12). For, indeed, critical self-awareness

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<sup>5</sup> If, as Walter Dignolo sustains, one cannot help but be where one thinks (2000, 49), then it seems to follow that a critical cosmopolitanism may be impaired by the tyranny of location. Gaonkar suggests that the decentring is in fact a mode of “creative adaptation” of a core that ultimately is Western-based: “Modernity has travelled from the West to the rest of the world not only in terms of cultural forms, social practices, and institutional arrangements, but also as a form of discourse that interrogates the present” (2001, 14).

and antagonism are not only part and parcel of the heretical modernisms but already embedded in the critical impulse of the Enlightenment. The paradox lies perhaps in the artificial need for the distinction of the aesthetic from the social, as a form of self-legitimation that forfeits systemic integration.

I, then, borrow Susan Friedman's words to suggest that a critical revision of the modern does not only stop at geographical expansion and discursive amendment, but also requires a revision of the modernity/modernism gap, promoting instead "an integrated, interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges how the social and the cultural are interwoven in different modernities, modernizations, and modernisms in different times and places" (2008, 15).

Modernity and modernism are then, by nature and vocation, other, diverse, fluid, translocal, plural, polycentric, alternative, not only because the location of the cultural is to be adversarial to hegemonic power discourses, as Dilip Parameswar Gaonkar contends when referring to "alternative modernities" (2001, 2),<sup>6</sup> but because the process of modernity is a complex system blending the social, the political, the cultural, and the economic. It is simultaneously critical and hegemonic, imaginative and rational, dislocated and situated, global and local, traumatic and empowering. To map the complex critical geography of the modern, then, requires a fluid cartography that will use the imagination of flux as an open model to track the role of culture in understanding the diverse and at times antagonistic modes of engagement with the process of modernity.

To speak about a peripheral modernity, then, is a task that requires the imagination, indeed one that rethinks the modern from the perspective of creative renewal. One that blends the intimation of questioning with the imaginative possibility of doing otherwise, differently and yet in a way that is inclusive of this common humanity of ours. I suggest therefore to proceed by focusing the conceptual lens on the possibilities of rethinking modernity from the perspective of the peripheral, and then use the peripheral casuistry of Fernando Pessoa's despondent diagnosis of the modern in *The Book of Disquiet* as a case in point for the periphery's renewed creative appropriation of the modern.

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Grossberg considers that the notion of alternative others the other modernities and displaces their subjects to the margins. In order to avoid the power positions involved in the centre/periphery dualism, he suggests the use of "multiple modernities" instead (2010, 286).

### 3 Peripher(ies)

“Peripheral” is a modern word whose use was disseminated with the exploits of the early modern age. From the Greek *periphéreia* – circumference – it originally refers to the external boundary of a round surface. In English, “periphery” came into use in the late Middle Ages between 1300 and 1400, while “peripheral” is noted between 1800 and 1810. “Periphery” (*periferia*) came into Portuguese vocabulary in 1720, and “peripheral” made its way into the dictionary in 1839. The semantic deployment of the periphery went hand-in-hand with the political creation of the centre. Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory recognizes a certain genealogical affiliation of the peripheral to the Iberian nations, which – afforded the status of semi-peripheral powers in Anglo-modernity – are nonetheless considered semi-peripheral in the (now present past) world-system, as go-betweens in the shifting of the circumference into new cores (1974, 250). In a way, the semi-periphery has it worse than the actual periphery in Wallerstein’s theory, as it becomes a resentful core, hanging on to the idea of a centre while being pushed to the margins. The ultimate destiny of all cores, it seems, is to become semi-peripheries first and accomplished peripheries later, as the current shift in power balance to Asia seems to suggest. Clearly the destiny of the centre is “not to hold,” as Yeats’s poem conceded.

To recapitulate, the very notion of the “peripheral” in its European linguistic usage since the fifteenth century, as something marginal, situated on the rim, of minor importance, as the *OED* shows, goes hand-in-hand with the rise of the modern project. I am here referring to the social modernization process of secularization, rationalization, industrialization, and emancipation that, though Eurocentric, has guided the construction of what Charles Taylor calls a certain “acultural modernity” (1995, 30) and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (2001, 23) defines as a societal modernization, marked by a universalist claim to hegemony drawn from the implementation of social and technological processes driven by Northern-based cultures and expanded into the global South. In this acultural modernity, which is also an epistemic model, the peripheral is often the Other, the non-modern.

Just as the modern is no longer a chronological construct but has been unavoidably inculcated by the territory, so too has the peripheral been stripped of its geographical limitations and plunged into the historical (dis)continuum. And yet, not all modernity(ies) has (have) fashioned itself (themselves) in the critical volition to reflect upon its (their) foundation as peripheral.

That is so because what has been understood as the euphoric, progressive project of modernity was already rooted in a divisive episteme. In fact, the enlightened emancipation of the individual of the Kantian project was already a process of epistemic and hierarchical distinction between the territory of a Northern progressive modernity and a (semi-)periphery of as-yet unenlightened sub-

jects (in the sense of being submitted to the epistemology of the North). This took place by means of a shift in the territorial system that was anchored around the Mediterranean basin and the Atlantic South towards the North, effectively creating a new centre for the modern project.

In fact, the construction of a culturally degraded South began simultaneously with the political and economical empowerment of the Northern centre. It is not simply today, under the *Diktat* of austerity, that a broadly defined global South longs to become visible and penetrate a political, economic, social, and epistemic fortress Europe, which in the words of certain politicians is under attack from the simultaneous movement of highly trained young professionals from southern Europe and North African death-boats. In 1771, the controversial Dutch philosopher Cornelius de Pauw wrote that “Africa begins in the Pyrenees” (1771, 246),<sup>7</sup> discursively transforming the rim of the modern circumference into the gateway to degeneration and the entrance hall to that waiting room of history with which Hegel branded the African continent in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Clearly, as Franco Cassano has consistently argued, the South is full of the discursive practices of the North (2005, 54).

Thus in order to avoid falling into the trap of the divisive episteme, binary simplifications,<sup>8</sup> and provincial politicization, it is important to ask when, where, what, and whose periphery we are discussing. It may be a wild claim to argue that, under current conditions, all centres are to become peripheries, but it is useful to acknowledge the quality of the rim and the nature of the exchanges (individual, communal, political, social, religious, sexual, economic) that take place there and are, actively or subversively, smuggled into the circumference.

Beatriz Sarlo’s appraisal of the Buenos Aires scene stresses the structural flows between the Northern centres and the specific conjuncture of Argentinian cultural time which allows for the euphoria of the modern to take a distinct South American shape. And yet, Beatriz Sarlo’s theory is one of convergence, stressing a march that would eventually draw modernist cultures together. Writing ten years later, in 1998, Carlos Blanco in “Desde la periferia” suggests instead a structural divergence at work in the peripheral as a territory where the primitive, the strange, the alien

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7 Translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

8 Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls this divisive strategy the “abyssal gap.” Abyssal thought (*pensamento abissal*) is defined as “a system of visible and invisible differences, whereby the invisible support the visible. The invisible differences are established by radical lines that divide social reality into two distinct universes: the ‘this side of the line’ universe and the ‘beyond the line’ universe. The division is such that the ‘beyond the line’ disappears as a reality, it becomes and is effectively produced as non-existing. Non-existence means that it has no relevant or meaningful existence” (2010, 23).



get smuggled back into the centre and return in an ineffable go-between (1998, 26). This is uncannily addressed by the Catalanian artist Antoni Tàpies in “Modernidad y primitivismo,” where he considers graffiti precisely a symptom of the smuggled evocation of the primitive in art in a sort of “analogia viviente” (2008, 197). This divergent strategy for the periphery comes across in Florencia Garramuño’s notable study *Modernidades primitivas: Tango, samba y nación* (2007), where she argues that there was a paradoxical coincidence between the smuggling of primitive, African rhythms into the two musical forms and the intense process of accommodating a cultural and social process of Western-based modernization which was in turn co-opted into the process of national identity formation. The hybrid flows of this murky entanglement are probably epitomized in Carmen Miranda’s song “O Tango e o Samba” [Tango and Samba] (1937). Carmen Miranda is a case in point of the periphery herself. A native of the small town of Marco de Canavezes, a municipality north of Oporto in Portugal, she clearly embodies the murky inscriptions of diverse peripheries and their ambivalence. Born in a rural area, in a peripheral northern locality in semi-peripheral Portugal,<sup>9</sup> she emigrated at ten months old with her family to the then-peripheral Brazil to become a world-class Hollywood star in the American centre. Carmen Miranda becomes an exotic mesh morphed into an invention of Latin American tradition. The tango and the samba, musical forms that pivot around the blurring of boundaries of class, gender, and culture, congregate in the work of composer Amado Régis, the ambivalent go-between of peripheral cultural politics, epitomized in the dialogue of different rhythms and languages.

“O Tango e o Samba” (music by Amado Régis, 1937)

Chegou a hora!  
 Chegou! ... Chegou!  
 Meu corpo treme e ginga  
 Qual pandeiro  
 A hora é boa  
 E o samba começou  
 E fez convite ao tango  
 Pra parceiro  
 Hombre, yo no sé por qué te quiero  
 Yo te tengo amor sincero  
 Diz a muchacha do Pará  
 Pero, no Brasil é diferente  
 Yo te quiero simplemente

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9 On the Portuguese geopolitics of the semi-periphery and its exogenous position see Moreira (2000).

Teu amor me desacata  
 Habla castellano num fandango  
 Argentino canta tango  
 Ora lento, ora ligeiro  
 Eu canto e danço, sempre que possa  
 Um sambinha cheio de “bossa”  
 Sou do Rio de Janeiro.

To address modernity from the standpoint of a moving periphery, then, means stressing plurality, renewal, and a strategic dissent; that is, it means prompting culture to relentlessly question its own conjuncture, taking into consideration a shifting, flowing geography. In this case, it means articulating the ambivalent locations of both singer and song. Periphery in this construct does not simply address the unequal relations of power in the Wallersteinian centre/periphery systemic model, but calls forth a notion of the modern that bears the mark of a centre that can definitely not hold and is rather reversely appropriated, by borrowing and mixing traditions, agencies, and styles, as Sarlo argues (1988, 22).

Instead of assuming a derivative dissemination from a core, the peripheral considers that modernity can only be envisaged as a plural form, with many different time and space coordinates, subject to different power structures, and spoken by a plurality of voices, bringing forth a myriad of vernacular narratives. How else would we combine the allure of totalitarian power in certain European modernist aesthetics<sup>10</sup> with the resistance to the system by post-colonial movements? Inspired by Dipesh Chakrabaty’s call for the provincializing of Europe (2000, 100), peripheral modernities conflate the simultaneous claim to peripherize and provincialize the modern. More than considering a model of alternative modernities, as Dilip Paramedhswar Gaonkar contends (2001, 2), rhetorically suggesting there is a model modernity to which these other modernities are alternative, the challenge we wish to pose is to rethink the disparate, non-coeval, and geographically heterogeneous modernisms/modernities from the standpoint of their common dissent, be it to power, aesthetic forms, or hegemonic identity formations, envisaging a study of the modern where all centres become one with peripheries.

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10 On authoritarian modernisms and “reactionary” aesthetics, see Gil (2008).

## 4 The peripheral case, or The mirror, the coat hanger, and the fountain pen

In law as in medicine, a case usually bears something pedagogical or exemplary about it. In a 2007 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Lauren Berlant called it a “problem-event,” an exemplary situation that applies the rules of the field of knowledge while deploying the strategy that may ultimately question it.

The case represents a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgement. Any enigma could do – a symptom, a crime, a causal variable, a situation, a stranger, or any irritating obstacle to clarity. [...] the case is always pedagogical, itself an agent. [...] as an expressive form of expertise and explanation the case points to something bigger, too, an offering of an account of the event and the world. (Berlant 2007, 663–665)

Fernando Pessoa is one such case, a problem-event for literature, for Portuguese and European culture, and a rather unpedagogical case for the modern that reflects a strategic peripheral consciousness.

Exactly one hundred years ago, in 1913, Fernando Pessoa began work on *Livro do Desassossego composto por Bernardo Soares, ajudante de guarda-livros na cidade de Lisboa* [The Book of Disquiet].<sup>11</sup> 1913 is a good year. “The summer of the century,” as the German writer Florian Illies recently put it (2013); or, as Jean-Michel Rabaté claimed, the cradle of modernism, more specifically, “the inception of our modern period of globalization” (2007, 1). Although Rabaté also credits Pessoa as one of the drivers of this early “globalization,” I feel it is relevant to look at the many ways in which the Portuguese author works precisely as an antagonist to that very discursive practice. Indeed, the uncanny fragments of the disquietude project present a philosophy of the modern against the grain, at odds with the master narratives of both modernization and cultural modernity, a project enticingly considered by Alain Badiou as the roadmap to a “modernity ahead of us” (1998, 38).

Arguably, in the Pessoaan paradox of a modernity ahead of us, not one that is yet to be accomplished as Habermas contends, but instead cannot by definition be attained, there resonates what Giorgio Agamben refers to as the mark of the contemporary, that is, a certain untimeliness, a “dys-synchrony” (Agamben 2011, 11) expressing the ability to coincide with time while at the same time being out of joint with it. The modernity ahead of us, that of Pessoa’s disquiet project, re-

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Badiou, in the *Petit manuel d’inesthétique*, writes that “the singular line of thought deployed by Pessoa is such that none of the established figures of philosophical modernity is capable of sustaining its tension” (1998, 37). He is particularly addressing Pessoa’s anti-Platonism and the concession of the inability to think beyond the materiality of the existing time.

flects, I contend, a certain peripheral consciousness of the modern, a disjunction that strikes not only at the heart of modern coevalness, but also dismantles its territories, i.e. that disturbs the very articulation of the time of the modern and its place. It is a project that simultaneously participates in the modern mainstream narrative while contesting it, that is coeval while looking back and treading ahead, that is inside the territory of modernity while questioning its limits.

The reasons why I have chosen Pessoa as symptom of a certain peripheral mode of articulating modern consciousness are twofold. The first reason is geographical. Pessoa is the exemplary agent of a modernity shaped from the semi-periphery of the European centre. Geography here is not a simple setting but a location traversed by power structures and embedded in a historical conjuncture, rendering his Iberian semi-peripheral situation much more than a result of the power dynamics of the world-system, and rather as a condition of existence, situated in the interval between cultures and traditions,<sup>12</sup> be it the Anglophone culture he was raised with in South Africa, the African colonial experience, or a certain Portuguese messianic decadence. It is a condition of a paradoxical empty fullness remarkably put forth in the initial verses of the heteronym Álvaro de Campos's poem "Tabacaria":

Não sou nada.  
 Nunca serei nada.  
 Não posso querer ser nada.  
 À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo. (de Campos 2014, 43)

[I am nothing.  
 I shall never be anything.  
 I cannot wish to be anything.  
 Aside from that, I have within me all the dreams of the world.]

Nothing could better represent the paradox of a gap that is simultaneously void and overflowing. This is precisely what defines the interval of the peripheral condition, the not yet and nonetheless already fully there.

Although an author working inside the territory, Pessoa's peripheral position in the cultural system provides for a writing clearly inspired by an outside looking in, either the Eurocentric avant-garde or the Anglo-American poetic tradition

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<sup>12</sup> The interval congregates Pessoa's/Soares's aesthetics of the fragment with an understanding of experience as disruption, breach, and caesura. As Paulo de Medeiros (2015, 84) has insightfully argued, the interval reveals fragmentation as strategy while serving as a wider space of (negative) refraction of Pessoa's/Soares's identity. Helena Buescu (2001) has underscored the strategic link between the interval and the fragment as essential to Pessoa's modernist e(aes)thetics. See also Maria Irene Ramalho Santos's underpinning of the wider genealogy of the fragment as an absolute, in the Romantic tradition (2010, 16).

(Whitman, Hart Crane). This has led Maria Irene Ramalho Santos to claim for Pessoa the status of an “Atlantic poet,” and to argue, following Harold Bloom’s suggestion in *The Western Canon* (1994), that a renewed understanding of his poetry is key to grasping American modernism itself (Ramalho Santos 2010, 17). Peripheral consciousness in this sense draws on the assumption that national borders – in artistic terms, those that create national literatures and cultures – are national only insofar as they “re-situate the nation in the world-system and continuously reinvent it” (Ramalho Santos 2010, 17). As such, the very notion of the peripheral is a becoming, allowing the time–space constraints of the present to be continuously reinvented.

Second, Pessoa’s inspirational singularity for a reflection on modernity results from an understanding of the peripheral as a critical attitude – a peripheral consciousness, I contend, anchored in the possibility of critically questioning the language of art, in his case of literature, and continuously attempting to renovate it while searching for a new language, as the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares does. In the logic of writing modernity’s disquiet as an autobiography without facts, a fragmented juxtaposition of scattered utterances, Pessoa seeks a different way to tell beyond the chronology of progressive time and beyond the limited location of his Lisbon bedroom. He does this from the ambivalent position of being simultaneously in time and out of joint with a Eurocentric euphoric modernity, at the geographical rim of Northern enlightened modernity and at the semi-centre of the Southern Atlantic, within the system of a broad – and perhaps early – epistemology of the South. It is in fact a renewal of artistic language from a peripheral consciousness that also resonates in Antoni Tàpies’s piece from 1986, “Por un arte modern y progresista,” where he claims that “una de las señas de la verdadera modernidad es la renovación y el trabajo constante sobre el lenguaje” [one of the signs of true modernity is constant renovation and work on language] (2008, 209).

Let us begin with language, then: with a peripheral, poetic fragment from the *Book of Disquiet* vividly echoing the peripheral project of a modernity ahead of us. Allow me to quote Pessoa/Soares:

As COISAS modernas são:

- (1) A evolução dos espelhos;
- (2) Os guarda-fatos.

Passámos a ser criaturas vestidas de corpo e alma.

E como a alma corresponde sempre ao corpo, um traje espiritual estabeleceu-se. Passámos a ter alma essencialmente vestida, assim como passámos – homens – corpos – à categoria de animais vestidos.

Não é só o facto de que o nosso traje se torna uma parte de nós. É também a complicação desse traje e a sua curiosa qualidade de não ter quase nenhuma relação com os elementos da elegância natural do corpo nem com os dos seus movimentos.

Se me pedissem que explicasse o que é este meu estado de alma, através de uma razão social, eu responderia mudamente apontando para um espelho, para um cabide e para uma caneta com tinta. (Pessoa 2008, 364)

[THE modern THINGS are  
(1) the evolution of mirrors;  
(2) the wardrobes.

We have become dressed creatures, in body and soul.

And because the soul always matches the body, there is also a spiritual garment. We have developed an essentially dressed soul, and have thus become – men, bodies – dressed animals.

It is not simply the fact that our attire has become a part of us. There is also the difficulty proper to the said attire and the curious fact that it bears almost no resemblance either to the elements pertaining to the body's natural elegance or to those of its movements.

If anyone were to ask me to explain my soul's disposition by means of some kind of social reasoning, I would simply reply by pointing to a mirror, a coat hanger, and a fountain pen.]

The fragment is indicative of Bernardo Soares's disjunctive reasoning, of his inability to provide meaning to existence and to the world. This is a sensation that is best represented in what comes across in the book as the aesthetics of the "interval," of a gap which neither denies nor acknowledges the weight of both tradition and progress, and signals the drifting nature of modern existence, trapped in-between, in an opening which may be void but not meaningless. The particular despondency and alienness of the modern condition is eagerly depicted with imagery related to dressing and attire. Indeed, the condition of the modern subject is thus displayed: "De tal modo me desvesti do meu próprio ser que existir é vestir-me. Só disfarçado é que sou eu" [In such a way have I undressed myself, that to exist is to get dressed. I am myself only in disguise] (Pessoa 2008, 364).

Dressing, then, refers to the discourses, the values and conventions, that make the *habitus* of the modern subject. So deeply traversed by these discursive practices is the subject that he can no longer exist without his cloak, which is ultimately a disguise. *The Book of Disquiet* is a fragmented book about modernity and its singular impossibility, renovating the language in which it is spoken while never fully formulating what modernity is. This fragment, then, is one of the rare occasions in which the idea of the modern is spoken about via the lyrical subject's despondency. Pessoa recuperates the Baudelairean strategy of addressing the modern through things and situations (fashion, make-up, women, the dandy, carriages, the military man, the multitude, etc.) that prompted Michel Foucault to argue that Baudelaire's modernity entails both a form of relationship to the present and to oneself (1990, 141). The dandy character, for the French poet, extols the complexities of hypercivilized modernity. His extreme care for the body unleashes a reflection on the privilege of this quirky singularity, just as artificial

care for the self and social distance display the cultural contradictions of a self-centred hedonism that is a mark of civilizational crisis and social decay. In the same vein, Soares's fragment on modern things provides a reflection on the intertwining of a certain care for the self and a peripheral modern consciousness.

The fragment begins with the statement that the modern is embodied in things. It is not simply the claim of a material turn that we witness here, the definite victory of objective culture *à la* Simmel, but rather the affirmation of the object's cultural status as material metaphor of an out-of-joint consciousness. For the I who is nothing, the object acts as a fulfilling identity supplement. Modern then are mirrors and wardrobes. A mirror as an archive of a (false) image, demanding critical questioning; and a wardrobe as the place where the vested (literally also the dressed) discourses/garments are kept. Yet, unlike Baudelaire's *dandysme*, which displays a critical, if distant, self-assurance, the garments kept in Soares's soul wardrobe exhibit an incompatibility between body and object. The dandy's blasé attitude and self-righteous sense of distinction present a dissonance between the cultivation of self and the contradictions of the modern world, whereas Soares's garments testify both to the subject's singular disjunction and simultaneously to his dys-synchrony with the present. The mirror, the coat hanger, and the fountain pen are the go-betweens of a modern project that is beguilingly situated on the rim of a spatio-temporal system while refusing to give in to the broad circumference which uses peripheries to create centres.

The peripheral mode that conjoins the personal with the collective, the creative with the social, comes clearly across in this material trilogy. First, there is the mirror that is held up to self and society, substantiating the reflexive mode that has accompanied the modern and its volition to be made visible, but also to render visible and by so doing to obscure as well. Then, there is the coat hanger, an object that bears no shape but that provides shape to the undressed garment. The hanger suggests a conjuncture that frames processes and existence. And finally, there is the fountain pen, the epitome of creation in the Freudian theatre of the mind, a sign of the critical creative project, of modernity as a language of critical renewal. The three modern things embody the coercive dressage of the modernist project and suggest a new language to substitute the current ways of doing and modes of reading. Instead of speaking about the modern in a language that will ultimately display the coercion of the soul, the mute objects suggest an alternative episteme, and allow the artist to say otherwise. While the mirror held up to the I both prompts and questions the self-reflexive hedonism of the modern spirit and the coat hanger expresses the constrictions of a vested modernity, the fountain pen suggests the possibility of art, of writing, to continuously undo the constrictions by remaking, erasing, rewriting. The objects act as symptoms of a modernity exhausted with itself and looking for the mute materiality of the object as a sub-

stitute for a tired subjectivity. And yet, it is not by undressing, by the deconstruction of the garments, ultimately through the mode of critique, that Pessoa's modernity looks ahead. It is the pen, the artist's instrument, that will redraft the modern project, fill in the blanks of the empty interval, the blank page, on the writing desk, of the small bedroom, in the peripheral city of Lisbon, overlooking the world.

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