

# An Introduction: Around Southern Modernisms

**Joana Cunha Leal, co-editor**

Assistant Professor, Department of Art History / Associated researcher,  
Instituto de História da Arte, FCSH-Universidade Nova de Lisboa

1.

[1] In this special issue you will find a discussion on southern modernisms stemming from an exploratory research project funded by the Portuguese Science Foundation (FCT) between 2014 and 2015.<sup>1</sup> As a project, *southern modernisms* had a theoretical and historiographical focus driven to discuss the resonances of the two words associated in its title, as well as the disquieting effect of their combination in the fields of visual arts and architecture. The first word – modernisms – stood against the standardized canon of modernism, thus bonding the research to the critical revision of that concept occurring in art history since the closing decades of the 20th century;<sup>2</sup> the second word based the project in southern Europe, meaning that Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece would set the ground for selecting case studies.

[2] The meridional Europeanness of the targeted countries was key for the project not only because it considered its feasibility in relation to the research fields of its team members, but because it opened the possibility to engage in an ongoing discussion on European peripheries that had been mainly focusing on central and eastern Europe so far. Moreover, it put forward a methodological turn, in that comparative approaches destined to break the limits of national histories were required. In other words, the investigation focused on transnational dialogues, cultural transfers and artistic exchanges rather than contributing to observe the local for the sake of national art histories.

[3] Finally, these southern boundaries were privileged as a field of inquiry because they also disrupted general assumptions on Eurocentric narratives. The fact is that these countries, despite being European, have given rise to artistic and architectural manifestations generally taken as peripheral, or dislocated, and at odds with modernism's standard definition (Italian Futurism

---

<sup>1</sup> The Southern Modernisms project (EXPL/CPC-HAT/0191/2013) ran from 1 March 2014 to 31 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition*, New York 1994, and T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, New Haven 1999.

being the exception). By the same token, the equating of colonial nations to centres of power is disturbed, as Portugal and Spain's peripheral status suggests a higher degree of complexity in the political and cultural dimensions of these poles.

2.

[4] The hegemonic notion of modernism (usually written with capital M) was shaped by Anglophone criticism. This notion is clearly dominated by the common belief that it is synonymous with a "quest for abstraction", in the sense early set forth by the famous schema drawn by Alfred H. Barr for the exhibition catalogue of *Cubism and Abstract Art* held at MoMA in 1936. The idea that modernism can be taken for, in Paul Wood's synthesis, "that conception of modern art as an increasingly autonomous field devoted not to the communication of information about a wider world of historical action, but to the production of aesthetic effects"<sup>3</sup> is of course also closely associated to Clement Greenberg's thought.<sup>4</sup> Greenberg's modernist theory significantly contributed to transform the anti-representation formalist bias into an aesthetical canon, though it was usually enacted through stylistic approaches tuned to acknowledge formal innovation, and to celebrate the level of abstraction achieved in each work in terms that were strange to the American art critic.<sup>5</sup>

[5] The hegemonic anti-representation bias in standard art history has gone far beyond the dismissal of illusionism and narrative sequence in the visual arts. It embeds art historical writing in a way that perfectly matches the abiding naturalization of hierarchical distinctions between center and periphery. It does so while driving into oblivion the debate on the critical and political dimensions of modern art discussed in Greenberg's first texts.<sup>6</sup> This is why it is unnecessary, and sometimes even inadequate, to look for direct dialogues with Greenberg's theory on medium specificity to acknowledge how the notion of modernism conflates aesthetic value and formal innovation, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Wood, "Modernism and the Idea of the Avant-Garde", in Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde, eds., *A Companion to Art Theory*, London 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in: <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html> (accessed 08 May 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Such triumphant "teleology of the new" also affected architectural history, in which the radical liberation from conventional academic formulas by the purest and newest rational forms and functionalist credos was prevailingly taken as the red line separating "proper" modernist works from "irrelevant" ones.

<sup>6</sup> See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in: *Partisan Review* vol. 6, 5 (1939), 34-49.

why formal innovation is straightforwardly read as the abandonment of representation.<sup>7</sup>

[6] Such hegemonic notion of modernism has been submitted to an intense critical revision determined to expose its essentialist premises and the exhaustion of art historical interpretations exclusively oriented towards formal analysis. Though some signs of change have come out, this revision did not yield the destitution of the canon. Nor did it lead to its perception as a historical and cultural convention supported by an exclusionary logic that presumes the insignificance of works failing the canon, or taken as mere subordinates to it. The standard notion of modernism prevails in art history, embedding discourses as if it were natural evidence, or part of nature itself.

[7] Moreover, the general assimilation of the canon ended up being reinforced by its very negation, or so it seems. Critical revisions stemming from art criticism close to minimal and post-minimal art operated to denounce modernism's essentialism, and to declare the loss of any high positive connotation it might have had. Modernism's ivory tower is consistently challenged, and its "dominant but dead" contemporary condition is taken to be only transcended by its negation, i.e. by postmodernism.

[8] As Hal Foster states in the introduction to his famous anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*:

*Assailed though it is by pre-, anti- and postmodernists alike, modernism as a practice has not failed. On the contrary: modernism, at least as a tradition, has 'won' but its victory is a Pyrrhic one no different than defeat, for modernism is now largely absorbed. Originally oppositional, modernism defied the cultural order of the bourgeoisie and the "false normativity" (Habermas) of its history; today, however, it is the official culture. As Jameson notes, we entertain it: its once scandalous productions are in the university, in the museum, in the street. In short, modernism, as even Habermas writes, seems "dominant but dead". This state of affairs suggests that if the modern project is to be saved at all, it must be exceeded.*<sup>8</sup>

[9] From this point of view, exceeding modernism's exclusionary logic depended on the converse recognition of postmodern anti-aesthetics (to which a status of coeval alternative to modernism had been increasingly attributed).<sup>9</sup> Such an opposition-outshine approach to modernism didn't bring a significant revision of the concept. Instead, it prompted a critical discourse

---

<sup>7</sup> See Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface", in: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle (1983) 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface", ix.

<sup>9</sup> See Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York 1997; Hal Foster et. al., eds., *Art Since 1900*, London 2012.

that left the canonic definition intact and ended up contributing to its naturalization.

3.

[10] *Southern modernisms'* aim was to undermine the notion of modernism embedded in art history writing, striving not only to contribute to its de-naturalization, but also to overturn the irrelevance (or even the invisibility) attributed by its exclusionary logic to the majority of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic production. In other words, we wanted to question the synecdochical effect of the modernist canon: how it left a much larger and richer territory of artistic and architectural production unaccounted for. The shrinking operation legitimizing that canon didn't seem to hold up in the face of cultural and artistic exchanges, dialogues, and debates occurring in many art circles (e.g. Barcelona) supporting artists' migrations to and fro renowned centers. Likewise, the canon didn't seem to hold up in the face of the complexity and richness of ongoing interrogations on the possibilities of representation, including those going against the grain of the triumphal "quest for abstraction". As such, the theoretical and historiographical challenge would be to favor the construction of a more inclusive notion of modernism (plural, and free from capital letters).

[11] Nevertheless, it was clear from the outset that working towards a more inclusive notion of modernism would not bring about an alternative if it were thought of as a catalogue exhaustively showcasing less appreciated, or forgotten references by the history of art written so far. To ponder on modernisms beyond canonic modernism demanded thorough research and discussion on how the convention had been built. Namely, it demanded thorough observation both of the basic solidarity established between the conquest of abstraction and aesthetic value, and of the time-geography lapse set by modern masters in recognized centers of artistic production.

[12] Having these premises in mind, research was defined around three main paths. First, the possibility to conceive modernism not only as an interrogation on the means and properties inherent to each artistic discipline, but also, as mentioned earlier, as an interrogation on the means and possibilities of representation itself. This possibility implied that abstraction could no longer be thought of as the historical telos of visual arts. It is not the only significant outcome of the fight against illusionism and narrative sequence, as it is not a pure result of the manifestation of the medium's essence. Rather, abstraction was taken as a segment of a much larger process, as a part of a much bigger query, an approach among many others questioning and debating the possibilities of visual arts beyond the criteria

and hierarchies institutionalized by Beaux Art academies and celebrated by the contemporary bourgeois public.

[13] The second path dealt with the hypothesis that the mobility of artists and works created networks based on encounters, dialogues, confrontations, and transfers directly affecting artistic production, while at the same time undermining the geographical and symbolic basis of the straightforward divide between center and periphery. These networks remained unintelligible (or even invisible) to nationally bounded standard art historical approaches, especially to those working with notions that imply the compliance with a center/periphery divide, such as "artistic influences".<sup>10</sup>

[14] Finally, a third path developed the hypothesis that southern European modernisms have deepened their bounds with vernacular and popular culture both in the visual arts and architecture. The idea was that the terms of this association could be considered as anticipating what would later become known as "critical regionalism".<sup>11</sup>

[15] We're sure that the analyses entailed in the various contributions to this special issue significantly contribute to enrich these discussions on *southern modernisms*.

### **Acknowledgements**

The Southern Modernisms Special Issue has been produced in collaboration with guest editor Maria Helena Maia of CEAA, Escola Superior Artística do Porto, as joint organiser of the Southern Modernisms International Conference that resulted in this publication.

### **How to Cite**

Joana Cunha Leal, "An Introduction: Around Southern Modernisms", RIHA Journal 0131, 15 July 2016, URL: [www.riha-journal.org/articles/2016/0131-0140-special-issue-southern-modernisms/0131-cunha-leal](http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2016/0131-0140-special-issue-southern-modernisms/0131-cunha-leal), URN: [see metadata].

---

<sup>10</sup> See Partha Mitter's discussion on the notion of "influence" in "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery", in: *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 90, 4 (Dec. 2008), 531-548.

<sup>11</sup> Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, *Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World*, Munich 2003; Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in: Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 16-30.

**License**

The text of this article is provided under the terms of the [Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

