
Reviewed by Todd Kuchta

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Known for pebble beaches, bunting, and bawdy postcards, the British seaside is an unlikely stop on a tour of modernist landmarks. Paris, Berlin, New York, London — but Blackpool, Brighton, Bournemouth? In *Modernism on Sea*, editors Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris make a case for including such locales in “a new geography of avant-gardism” (1). Their interdisciplinary collection brings together sixteen essays on the art and culture of the British seaside in the first half of the twentieth century. Contributors consider a broad swath of cultural production inspired by the promenade and pier — literature, film, architecture, design, painting, postcard art, and music. The result is an eminently readable and eye-opening mosaic of the many ways the shoreline helped to shape modern British culture. Readers may come away unconvinced that the seaside was a beachhead of avant-garde assault in Britain, but they are sure to gain a deeper appreciation for the coast’s unsung prominence in twentieth-century British art.

A few Virginia Woolf titles — *The Voyage Out*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* — may be enough to suggest this prominence, and David Bradshaw deftly traces Woolf’s recurring sea imagery, which was nurtured by her summers on the Cornwall coast. Seaside writing by the Sitwells, Elizabeth Bowen, and Stevie Smith receives a similar mix of biographical and critical attention. Other chapters feature less famous but equally fascinating instances of maritime modernism. Brighton held Britain’s first post-impressionist exhibition outside London after painters of the Camden Town Group migrated there, discovering a distinctly modern mise-en-scène in the town’s seafront spectacles.

Some of Britain’s most celebrated icons of International Style architecture were built at seaside resorts, where designers drew inspiration from the deck railings, portholes, and tiered balconies of ocean liners. Avant-garde artist John Piper praised the functional form and tidy lines of such nautical style, while Paul Nash discovered “seaside surrealism” in the Dorset town of Swanage. Composer Benjamin Britten wrote his oceanic opera *Peter Grimes* in the Suffolk town of Aldeburgh, which then instituted its renowned Festival of Music and Arts. And organizers of the 1951 Festival of Britain celebrated postwar reconstruction and the Great Exhibition’s centenary by bringing the seaside to London, transforming the South Bank into a modernist promenade. *Modernism on Sea* teems with compelling case studies of this sort.

The respective chapters by Feigel and Harris, which bookend the collection, situate maritime modernism between the poles of liberation and order, release and containment, letting go and tidying up. Feigel examines the “aesthetics of excess” that dominated fictional and cinematic portrayals of the seaside during the 1930s. “[I]n a decade otherwise dominated by political earnestness” due to economic hardship and
impending war, the seaside resort offered an atmosphere of “ecstatic freedom” and “tawdry excess” that was “opulent and crude but, above all, pleasurable” (17). In contrast, Harris insightfully looks back over a number of earlier chapters to trace a counter-current of “seaside orderliness” in the ceremonies and rituals that artists “invent to hold back the tide” (228).

Within this framework of freedom and constraint, the seaside’s capacity to reveal or resolve oppositions emerges as a recurring motif. Bradshaw shows how the sea acts as “the agent of reconciliation in [To the Lighthouse], bringing together island and lighthouse, wealth and poverty, feminine and masculine, vagueness and solidity” (111). William May claims that Stevie Smith's poetry, fiction, and drawings imagine the coast not only as “a haven and a threat,” but as “a memorial to the past and a confrontation with an uncertain future” (85). Frances Spalding examines John Piper’s love of seaside architecture for melding spartan functionalism and unselfconscious swagger (think of the broad black-and-white surfaces of lighthouses and other coastal structures). Ben Morgan reads Sylvia Plath’s sea poems as striving to balance the New Criticism’s fixity and “unchangeable form” with the flux of “change and cyclical movement” (131).

And though Michael Bracewell looks back at the modern seaside through a self-consciously contemporary lens, his brief paean to the Lancashire town of Morecambe captures modernity’s unevenness—the way residual traces of earlier periods linger on into the modern era. For Bracewell, seaside towns are “a mass of contradictions, and in their every detail you can glimpse an earlier age” (36), particularly “the faded grandeur of Edwardian formality” and the “sense of requiem and elegy” that comes with it (42). Other chapters allude to this seaside sensibility with tantalizing brevity.

The collection is divided into six sections, with essays from different disciplines often grouped together under a single thematic heading. The link between heading and chapters can seem arbitrary at times, as with the otherwise fine essays in the section “Sand and Stucco.” But the structure has a number of virtues. It creates an interdisciplinary space where an art historian is invited to throw down her blanket alongside a literary critic, architectural scholar, or filmmaker. It offsets the predominance of literature (the primary focus of seven essays, compared to a handful each for the visual arts and architecture, and one for music). Perhaps most importantly, it compensates for a lack of interdisciplinarity within the individual chapters themselves. While some contributors skilfully navigate different approaches or artistic mediums—Feigel, Spalding, and Harris come to mind—it is ultimately the collection's organization, not its individual chapters, that makes it interdisciplinary. But this is not meant to disparage the chapters that stay well within their own disciplinary boundaries. In some cases, these provide the collection’s true highlights. Despite its tenuous connection to the British coast, for example, Ben Morgan’s analysis of Plath yields the collection’s most satisfying treatment of form in any medium, largely because Morgan is such a strong close reader: “The rebellious movement of the lines—sense strained [. . .] by the interruption of an awkward, even brutal enjambment—makes us feel the desire of the ‘I’ not to participate in the narrative, to look away, only to be dragged back into the drama just in time” (125). Such sustained attention to the modernist form of maritime content is surprisingly sparse in other chapters devoted to literature. As a result, though Feigel
and Harris claim they want us to view the essays as a series of “day-trips rather than odysseys” into their subject matter (2), their apt analogy glosses over the survey-like feel of many literature chapters, which tend to skim the surfaces rather than plumb the depths.

One of the collection’s most compelling sections is “Nautical Style,” which focuses on architecture and design. Bruce Peter and Philip Dawson show how ocean liners inspired avant-garde architecture on land. Their chapter brims with wonderful anecdotes, like Le Corbusier paying homage to fellow passenger Josephine Baker on board the _Lutétia_ and Fritz Lang’s first sighting of New York from the _Deutschland_. The subsequent chapter by Fred Gray demonstrates that the newfound popularity of bathing pavilions, lidos, and open-air pools in the 1930s depended on modernist design elements: flat roofs, broad white surfaces, and large panes of sheet glass. Gray adds that “the stripped-down, clean-lined, modernist lidos of the 1930s went hand-in-hand with the development of minimal, figure-hugging costumes for swimming and sunbathing” (159). Moments like these help to make the counterintuitive link between modernism and the seaside more convincing by spilling over into other elements of twentieth-century culture.

But there are some surprising gaps and absences. Joseph Conrad and James Joyce get only passing mention. The multiple varieties of “modernism” and “avant-garde” are barely addressed, though these can change quite dramatically depending on the chapter or topic. Some chapters reinforce a rather dated antagonism between modernism and mass culture, rather than considering their dialectical interrelations as in more recent scholarship. And despite the subtitle’s nod to “the British Seaside,” _Modernism on Sea_ is really an English affair, with barely a glance toward the Celtic shores. Indeed, though there are plenty of international characters and references, there is no sustained analysis of the international influences on English modernism. This is surprising, given that the porous character of national maritime borders is a hallmark of recent work in oceanic literary and cultural studies.

Even so, _Modernism on Sea_ has much to offer readers from a variety of disciplines. Feigel and Harris concede that while Britain may not have produced a masterpiece of seaside modernism comparable to _Buddenbrooks_ or _À la recherche_, it can still boast “a rich literary heritage, a continuous tradition of painting and sculpture, and some of the most innovative architecture in Europe” (4). In making this case, _Modernism on Sea_ is a rousing success.


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