

## Forum Discussion of *Modernism and Mimesis* (2020), by Stephen D. Dowden. Editors' Introduction

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Georg Mein/Rolf Parr/William Collins Donahue

*Modernism and Mimesis* boldly reassesses the massively overused term »modernism.« What is more—because this is not merely a terminological debate—Dowden seeks in this study to elucidate the thing itself. Wide-ranging in its purview, this ambitious book examines not only literature, but painting and music as well. First at Yale, then at Brandeis, where he is currently Chair of the Department of German and Russian, he has spent a distinguished career thinking and writing about the topic, and offers an innovative argument, deploying literature itself (mainly Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*) as a principal mode of inquiry.

We have invited a group of distinguished scholars, each with expertise in the area of modernism and with an interest in the larger issues it raises with respect to aesthetics, criticism, theory, the humanities, and higher education. Rather than a series of book reviews, the forum is conceived of as a critical mosaic, with contributors entering into the discussion from a variety of perspectives. We have asked them to be selective rather than comprehensive, and to engage Dowden critically and constructively, with an aim to moving the discussion forward on the issues raised in his study.

Why *andererseits*? We are, as the journal subtitle suggests, a »Yearbook of Transatlantic German Studies.« Perhaps it would suffice to note that a prominent *North American* scholar addresses here a primarily (though of course not exclusively) *European* phenomenon, with a special focus on German literature, art, painting and postwar aesthetics. That might be reason enough. But there is more. There is, we believe, a pervasive sense in Germany that modernism, or the »historical avant garde« as it is more frequently referred to in German discourse, is a tired topic. Colleagues at leading Germany-based journals confirm this sense of the subject's exhaustion, which is articulated in Moritz Baßler's recent book, *Populärer Realismus* (2022). There one reads of modernism as, essentially, a bygone phenomenon. It still

inspires critical categories (even those applied to realism), but it is really all over and done with.<sup>1</sup> Time to make our peace with that and move on.

Enter Dowden, who argues that this is not the case, or at least that it needn't be so. He has convinced us that the matter is not after all so settled or sufficiently masticated. And we think this forum makes the point. We are pleased to have the participation of such prominent scholars, and glad to have Dowden's own response at the conclusion.

It is our hope that this forum section will become a crucial point of reference for anyone writing on this topic henceforth. We don't wish to have the final word, only to have provided the catalyst for a fruitful, transatlantic discussion.

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1 See the »Doppelrezension« of Baßler's *Populärer Realismus. Vom Internationalen Style gegenwärtigen Erzählens* (Beck 2022) in *Arbitrium* 41.2: pp. 1–15 (forthcoming, August 2023) by Sarah Colvin (Cambridge) and William Collins Donahue (University of Notre Dame).