Of Modernism, Mimesis, Caves, and Mountains

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In *Modernism and Mimesis*, Stephen Dowden draws a line from the high literary modernism of authors like Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett to the visual work of artists like Kandinsky, Rothko, and Serra, extolling, in all their creations, an »elemental simplicity« possessing, and producing in audiences, qualities such as exhilaration, transcendence, and self-forgetfulness.[1] Those who have been unnerved by the vertigo produced by standing near a Serra sculpture may think less of exhilaration than of nausea. However, Dowden's terms are powerful tools with which to understand the form, the effects, and the value of a vast range of modern, modernist, or 20th-century artworks. He offers us »spare compression« for Beckett, »austere clarity« for Kafka and Walser, »stripped-down« for Schoenberg and Webern.[2] Throughout *Modernism and Mimesis*, modern art is understood to be simple and accessible rather than difficult and elite, and Dowden is always at pains to explain why that which seems difficult, and then is revealed to be simple, is essential and truthful.

Modernism and Mimesis offers a pivotal episode in human history to understand the production of such rigorous modern artworks. The cultural history and timeframe of Dowden's argument can be found in his choice for the first of the beautiful full-color images included in his book: the Paleolithic rock paintings of the Chauvet Cave in Ardèche, France.[3] This painting has the same qualities Dowden admires in modernist artworks: an »austere clarity,« if you will, or what he also calls »robust naiveté,« which produces feelings of exhilaration and transcendence in its viewers.[4] The painting dates to 32,000-30,000 BCE; it was discovered in the 1990s.[5] Another group of Paleolithic rock paintings, though, has a much more resoundingly modernist discovery date: in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of high literary modernism,

1 Stephen D. Dowden: Modernism and Mimesis. Palgrave 2020, p. 24.

2 Ibid., p. 24.

3 Ibid., p. 27.

4 Ibid., p. 26.

5 Joshua Hammer: Finally, the Beauty of the Chauvet Cave Makes Its Grand Public Debut.« In: Smithsonian Magazine, April 2015, online at http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/france-chauvet-cave-makes-grand-debut-180954582.

children of the village of Cabrerets, in the Lot region, discovered Pech Merle.[6] Indeed, Paleolithic cave discovery and exploration had a firm grip on the late-nineteenth, early-20th century European imagination, and is an underappreciated contribution to modernist aesthetics. For the inclusion of the Chauvet paintings, as for all of Dowden's discerning selections, one is grateful. Readers can linger over many examples gathered by Dowden with impressive erudition and unapologetic respect for the power of modernist artworks to captivate their readers, viewers, and listeners. Throughout, *Modernism and Mimesis* revisits the scene of wonder and enchantment to be gleaned from encounters with key modernist works – such as *Doctor Faustus*, Franz Marc's horse paintings, or *Mrs. Dalloway* – in order to recuperate the »robust naiveté« in »good« art that derives not from an attempt to copy reality, »but to participate in its ebb and flow.«[7]

Wonderment, another term for »robust naivete,« offers an antidote to relentless pessimism and dystopian thinking that arises in the context of what the cultural historian Rosalind Williams calls »the triumph of human empire.«[8] If, by the late 19th century, any sense of a place unmapped by human exploration, conquest, prediction, and knowledge has dwindled to nearly nothing, then modernist art of the 20th century grapples with redefining a human perspective that remains open to possibility, to searching, to a notion of art as participation in the unpredictable ebb and flow of life. What are some more recent contexts for this kind of ebb and flow, or, more pointedly, for the attraction to it? To lead with Chauvet is to propose an approach to modernist art that emphasizes its continuity with the distant past, and to downplay some of the more typical developments with which modernism is often contextualized. Dowden's is more a formalist than a contextualist approach, which explains much of the appeal of his book. It harmonizes with »the new formalism,« and emerges out of a parting of ways with »the new historicism.« However, *Modernism and Mimesis* does offer some ways of formulating a context for the »robust naiveté« and »exhilaration« one experiences with modernist art. Among the most familiar and influential is Max Weber's characterization of modernity as disenchanted in »Science as Vocation,« the argument of which Dowden paraphrases thus: »Along with superstition and the belief in magic, reason has banished all spirit and charm too. Meaning and value have disappeared. Though wholly discontent

6 »History of the Discovery of the Cave,« Centre de préhistoire du Pech Merle, online at https://en.pechmerle.com/the-prehistory-center/the-pech-merle-cave/history-of-the-the-discovery-of-the-cave-2/. For further insights into the history and aesthetics of Paleolithic cave paintings and other artworks, a magnificent source is Christine Desdemaines-Hugon: Stepping Stones: A Journey Through the Ice Age Caves of the Dordogne. Yale 2010.

7 Dowden, p. 26.

8 Rosalind Williams: The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris, and Stevenson at the End of the World. Chicago 2013.

with the modern condition himself, Weber rejects the thought that modernity's disenchantment could ever be dispelled by art, religion, or anything else.«[9] Certainly, »Science as Vocation« reads as a bracing and often necessary warning against anti-intellectual re-enchantment, such as the craving for religious experience, or the »crowd phenomena« of youth cults which make »idols« of personality and personal experience.[10] However, Weber also has a few words to say about »great art«:

> It is not accidental that our great art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and most intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating which corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand.[11]

Even if disenchantment diminishes the scale of art's community-wide power, Weber's argument makes room for great art nevertheless to flourish, albeit quietly.

Weber's sense of the »intimate« can be traced in Dowden's reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where he finds that Clarissa herself »overlaps with modernist sensibility« in the simple fact, and act, of her party.[12] He concludes his dexterous reading of Woolf's work, to which I cannot do justice here, with a flourish that likens Clarissa's party not only to the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, but to »any other novel, too.«[13] Like other readers who recuperate Clarissa as an artist figure, Dowden sees her as someone who makes an artifact (the party) that does not seek to copy reality, but instead to allow others to participate in its ebb and flow. In Weber's terms, this pushes against cultic re-enchantment, while it still allows not only for the existence, but the success of »great art.« Great art might mean a 1923 party, the popular novels of Dickens read serialized in the 19th century or today in a book club, or, why not, the *pianissimo* artifact of a miniature story like Woolf's snail tale »Kew Gardens,« meticulously typeset by hand and decorated with woodcut illustrations by Vanessa Bell (not cited in Dowden's book, which prefers novels to short stories).

A reader of *Modernism and Mimesis* can pursue the question of »intimate,« or *pianissimo*, »great art« in the chapter on painting, »Painting the World Picture.« Dowden contrasts the Romantic image of nature, which depends on a human observer figure who cannot be part of a nature, with the animal paintings of Franz Marc, in which »humans have been animalized: they do not provide perspective on nature but

9 Dowden, p. 28.

10 Max Weber: Science as Vocation. In: Essays in Sociology, trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Oxford 1958, pp. 129–156 and p. 137.

11 Ibid., p. 155.

12 Dowden, p. 93.

13 Ibid.

instead are as much folded into the landscape as the beasts are.«[14] To be »folded into the landscape« (of a visual field) is like being in the »ebb and flow« of reality rather than attempting to copy it. The attempt to copy, as opposed to the participation of being »folded« in, positions the artist in a stance of detachment. When describing the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, Dowden refers to images where a human observer faces away from the viewer and watches nature from a distance, perhaps even through a window. This positioning has its analogue in Walter Benjamin's account of aura as »the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.«[15] Dowden elaborates on this passage further: Benjamin writes about the present-day masses' desire to »get closer,« which Dowden paraphrases as »a way of looking at nature that, for example, might be typical of a coal-mining conglomerate« rather than of a contemplative (Romantic) beholder.[16] By contrast, Franz Marc's paintings (and they rather resemble those at Chauvet and Pech Merle) offer a third way, in which horses are neither instrumentalized nor distant; for Dowden, Marc's horses are modernist because they *do* possess auratic singularity, without being beheld from afar, and therein lies their capacity to enchant. Dowden's »folded into the landscape« is a way of getting closer to nature without treating it as a resource; it is what Weber might call »intimate.«

If Marc's landscapes with horses provide a suitable modernist counterexample to the Romantic mountain, where might we find a modernist mountain with qualities of intimacy and enchantment? The 20th and 21st centuries have become an era of mountain disenchantment. The climbing of Mount Everest has become synonymous with the commodification of experience, and there was never anything intimate or *pianissimo* about it in the first place. In the present context, one thinks at first perhaps of *The Magic Mountain*. But does it charm? I propose going farther afield. To find a modernist mountain, accompany Nan Shepherd to the Scottish Cairngorms, as she wrote about them in the 1940s in a work published 30 years later as *The Living Mountain*. If *Modernism and Mimesis* suggests a need for a revivified vocabulary of modernist aura, truth, and intimacy, one could do worse than collect terms from Shepherd's writing, which does not so much *climb* a mountain as it does fold into it. Shepherd walks barefoot on the mountain, the better to experience »a flower caught by the stalk between the toes« as a »small enchantment.«[17] She lets the eye rest so the ear can take over: »When the snows melt, cataracts sound in my ears all night,

14 Ibid., p. 115.

15 Ibid., p. 140.

16 Ibid., p. 141.

17 Nan Shepherd: The Living Mountain. Edinburgh 2014, p. 104.

pouring through my sleep.«[18] By sleeping on the mountain she seeks »to recapture some pristine amazement.«[19] She finds upon waking after just a few minutes that

> It would be merely fanciful to suppose that some spirit or emanation of the mountain had intention in thus absorbing my consciousness, so as to reveal itself to naked apprehension difficult otherwise to obtain. I do not ascribe sentience to the mountain; yet at no other moment am I sunk quite so deep into its life. I have let go my self. The experience is peculiarly precious because it is impossible to coerce.[20]

A frequently used word in *The Living Mountain* is »exquisite,« which, besides meaning beautiful, means »searched for«:

> And suddenly the world is made new. Submerged but erect in the margin of the stream I see a tree hung with light – a minimal tree, but exquisite, its branches delicate with globes of light that sparked under the water. I clamber down and thrust a sacrilegious hand into the stream […] I am holding […] a sprig of square-stalked St John's Wort […] I think of the Silver Bough of Celtic mythology and marvel that an enchantment can be made from so small a matter.[21]

The Living Mountain offers a series of encounters like these, which share qualities of the exquisite modernist landscapes and longings that *Modernism and Mimesis* celebrates. *Modernism and Mimesis* is, after all, a book of comparisons, for comparatists, written about works that are widely translated, many of them from German to English. To bring a Scottish work about mountains into the fold of this book is to follow Dowden's lead in gesturing, at the end, to the »true transnational identity« and »larger flow« of every artwork to which each translation contributes.[22]

18 Ibid., p. 95.
19 Ibid., p. 91.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 45.
22 Dowden, p. 245.