

The Periodic Imagination

When the journal *Modernism/modernity* was launched in 1994, its founders sought to reframe modernism not just as an historical period, but as an ‘ongoing transformation in the entire set of relations governing the production, transmission, and reception of the arts’.¹ The kissing cousins modernism and modernity have dominated, proto- to post-, what Alain Badiou might call the the subjectivity of the long twentieth century.² But that subjectivity is a notoriously vexed one. As an ‘ongoing transformation’, ‘the modern’ remains stubbornly anti-historical even as its historical outlines are ever more firmly entrenched. Raymond Williams once said that modernism ‘stops history dead’.³ ‘Modernism being the terminus,’ he wrote in 1987, ‘everything else afterwards is counted out of development. It is *after*, stuck in the post.’ Emerging from the *mise en abyme* of post-postmodernity and its motley cohort of belateds, the concept of ‘the contemporary’ challenges modernism’s cultural dominance. It also uncannily replicates some of modernism’s most compelling (and most troubling) periodizing maneuvers. I explore in this paper how ‘the contemporary’ as an historical period differentiates itself from modernity. Further, I ask, is there a contemporary analogue to modernism in the millennial arts, and if so what does that analogue look like? To what ends might the contemporary once again be called to ‘make it new’?

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¹ Lawrence Rainey and Robert von Hallberg, ‘Editorial/Introduction’, *Modernism/modernity* 1.1 (Jan 1994): 1–3.

² Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Polity, 2007), originally published as *Le Siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

³ Raymond Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’ in *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 1989), 34–5.