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Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature ed. by Kara Watts, Molly Volanth Hall, Robin Hackett (review)

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Book Reviews

***Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature*, ed. Kara Watts, Molly Volanth Hall, and Robin Hackett. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019). Pp. 274. \$85.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Marta Figlerowicz, Yale University

As I read *Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature*, my mind wandered to a 1929 essay by Theodor Adorno. The essay considers the late quartets of Ludwig van Beethoven and the early compositions of Franz Schubert. Adorno describes the transition between the two composers as follows:

He who crosses the threshold between the years of Beethoven's death and Schubert's will shiver, like someone emerging into the painfully diaphanous light from a rumbling, newly formed crater frozen in motion, as he becomes aware of skeletal shadows of vegetation among lava shapes in these wide, exposed peaks, and finally catches sight of those clouds drifting near the mountain, yet so high above his head. He steps out from the chasm into the landscape of immense depth bounded by an overwhelming quiet at its horizon, absorbing the light that earlier had been seared by blazing magma.¹

A reader of modernist criticism will be instantly familiar with the grand style and chilly backdrop Adorno adopts here. Four years earlier, in his introduction to *The New Science* (1925), Erich Auerbach imagined a Giambattista Vico who “stands alone in the icy air of a glacier, and above him stretches the immense baroque horizon of the vault of heaven.”² Ten years earlier still, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1915), Georg Lukács described how an antiquity “guided by the stars” was superseded by a modern “world abandoned by God,” to whose prayers and hopes the starry sky had cooled.³ Inspiring or perhaps enabling each other, modernism's literary-critical greats had an infinity of such cold abysses at the ready, holding them out before artists and writers to echo their solitude, futility, and belatedness, but also the enormous latent force of their feelings.

Such passages spring to mind when reading *Affective Materialities* for two reasons. First, they illustrate a thesis that forms the volume's

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186 through line. For all of modernism's suspicion of sentiment and emotion, the authors argue, their writings brim with affects understood as more impersonal psychic and bodily forces. But modernists find affects in unexpected, counterintuitive contexts in which one would not have expected them to emerge or linger. Barren like crystals, ruins, corpses, and moonscapes, these contexts testify to affect's survival beyond, and independence of, the fixtures of subjectivity.

Present-day lovers of such counterintuitive affective sites will be pleased by this volume's themes and approaches. From Molly Volanth Hall and Kara Watts's introductory essay on ether, through Karen Guendel's reflections on flesh and granite and William Kupinse's on "cold crystal," the essays weave together some of the most radically anti-humanist strands of affect theory and new materialism. They also show that these late twentieth-century theoretical standpoints describe modernist aesthetic attitudes very well. Each chapter focuses on one or two major writers: T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, H.D., and others. Most are Anglophone, the rare exception being Kathryn Van Wert's discussion of Rainer Maria Rilke. Monophone as it is, the volume does not feel provincial. Its philosophical and political aims are broad and the range of topics on which it touches—from ecology to queer theory—is considerable. In the concluding essay, Robin Hackett movingly brings the volume's concerns into the present moment. She applies its methods to the racism and queerphobia that subtend the architectural and affective politics of gender segregation in twenty-first century America—and powerfully condemns the ways in which emotions, as opposed to affects, bolster these harmful social patterns. "[E]motion produces the others of racist seclusion" in the "circumstances" Hackett describes; "[b]lank affect, alternately, produces access" to shared social spaces by challenging and partly neutralizing the normative categories that emotions reinforce (249–250).

The second tie that links Adorno's, Auerbach's, and Lukács's icy landscapes to *Affective Materialities* is metatextual: it concerns all of these authors' analogous relations to their critical method. Readers familiar with the passage from Adorno cited above will probably have encountered it in Edward Said's *On Late Style* (2007), a meditation on representations of decadence and belatedness. Neither Said nor Adorno sees "lateness," as the former calls it, as an intellectual catastrophe. Indeed, for both of them, as for Lukács, Auerbach, and many others, its pathos is rather appealing. Lateness enables a particular kind of attentiveness that has less to do with breaking new ground than with what Said describes as the "deepen[ing]" and solidifying of preexisting mental tracts and paradigms. In the hands of their belated users, these paradigms become an impersonal, inanimate mold, striking in both its clarity and its increasing separateness from its messier, improvised origins.⁴ The authors of *Affective Materialities* deploy affect theory with this late-style familiarity. In the authors' arguments, we see affect theory and new materialism crystallize into a predictable and structured method. This method has its rituals, like the invocation of the intrinsic multiplicity of its "claims" and "perpetual state of transformation" of its objects (127). It has canonical authorities, such as Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and others, whose writings are invoked but no longer contested or critiqued. Like a classical memory palace, it leads one through a series of familiar loci: the non-human relation; the moment of emergence; the ugly feeling.

The arguments through which the authors of *Affective Materialities* reach those points are elegant, at times acrobatically so, and locally very illuminating. Karen Guendel's "Flesh over Granite," an analysis of Walt Whitman's "embodied presence" in Williams, stands out as especially accomplished (33–54), as does Stuart Christie's "E. M. Forster among the Ruins." But these essays' confident clarity comes, in part, from the degree to which the cognitive moves they execute have become predictable. This is affect theory's and new materialism's late style. The authors of *Affective Materialities* use the affordances of this framework to their fullest potential. It is crystalline in a satisfying sense, its intricate precision not unlike the beauty of snowflakes. But it is hard to tell how much longer we will be able to remain in these cooling conceptual spaces. Even as it makes one feel grateful for the belated present moment to which we belong, the volume highlights the need for a new, different critical future that might follow it.

Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, "Schubert" (1928), trans. Jonathan Dunsby and Beate Perrey, *19th-Century Music* 29, no. 1 (2005): 3–14, 7.
2. Translated by René Wellek in Wellek, "Auerbach and Vico," *Lettere Italiane* 30, no. 4 (1978): 457–469, 461. The original passage is to be found in Erich Auerbach, "Vorrede des Übersetzers," in Giambattista Vico, *Die neue Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur der Völker* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1924): 9–39, 30–31.
3. See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 88.
4. Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 13.

Surrealism at Play. Susan Laxton. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. 384. \$109.95 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Johanna Malt, King's College London

Like other notable studies of surrealism published in recent years, Susan Laxton's new book takes a single theme or concept as the organizing principle of what presents itself as a new history of the movement.¹ This can be a useful strategy, allowing critics to illuminate neglected figures, practices or influences and to reframe or renegotiate the surrealist canon. In Laxton's case it gives rise to original and thought-provoking readings of familiar works or groups of works and brings together an intriguing—sometimes surprising—corpus of material. Laxton's premise is that play is perhaps the most radical dimension of surrealist activity, but one that has been critically neglected. The first part of this is plausible, the second rather less so; games, wanderings, and ludic creative strategies have long been acknowledged as central both to surrealist practice and to its influence on later movements such as situationism and Fluxus. Laxton's contribution lies in the particular way in which she understands "play" in this context, and in the sustained attention she pays to how it stands in relation to work, with its associations of purposefulness, productivity, and critical reason, and to art, which fits neither category easily. She rightly rejects the idea that surrealist play is straightforwardly joyous and liberatory, noting the compulsion and destructiveness that characterize it as marked by the Freudian death drive.²

Laxton's understanding of play draws heavily on Walter Benjamin, who has long been the favored theorist of scholars of surrealism. Laxton argues, following Miriam Hansen, that Benjamin's conception of *Spielraum* (translated variously as space or room for play, or "scope-for-action") offers an idea of play that no longer sees it in Kantian terms as an end in itself, but treats it rather as a means, albeit a means without end—that is to say without closure. For Benjamin—and for the surrealists—this idea enabled play to be anchored in politics, specifically via technology: "In an effort to theorize the relation between art and technology, thus restoring art's relevance to modern social relations, Benjamin privileged technologically based artworks as vehicles through which the subject could form a healthy, rather than alienated, relationship to mechanical forms" (6). This could be achieved via exactly the kind of play that so appealed to Benjamin in his encounters with surrealism, and it is to these "techno-ludic" forms that Laxton devotes the main body of her study.

The book is arranged in four chapters and a "postlude," the chapters bearing one-word titles that characterize particular practices or effects of surrealist play: "Blur," "Drift," "System," and "Pun." Chapter one deals with Man Ray's cameraless photograms or rayographs, an unexpected starting point that announces Laxton's revisionist approach to the surrealist canon. Arguing that