Conclusion

The Perspective of the Present

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Abstract and Keywords

In conclusion, this short chapter surveys the ways in which the novelists discussed in this book have become reference points for contemporary debates about the legacy of modernism and experimentation among novelists such as Teju Cole, Zadie Smith, and Ben Lerner. It also surveys how contemporary novelists’ engagements with art are being driven by different concerns than those of earlier writers—attempts to blur the lines between autobiography and fiction, or to recover the political and aesthetic potential of wonder and enchantment. In doing so, it shows how the interactions between art and the novel traced in this book have become part of literary history.

Keywords: contemporary fiction, Teju Cole, modernism, Zadie Smith, Ben Lerner
'His are the books of our history opened before us'. So concludes one of Teju Cole’s appreciations of the work of W. G. Sebald, a writer whom he has cited as a major influence on his work, one who provides him with ‘a feeling of return rather than arrival’. Critics like James Wood have located Sebald’s influence on Cole in the ‘steady, accidental inquiry’ governing the syntax and rhythm of a prose that mirrors the seemingly aimless journeys of Sebald’s solitary wanderers. But Open City (2011) also shares what Cole saw as Sebald’s attitude towards history: ‘These things, as Sebald said in one of his last interviews, once you have seen them, have a habit of returning, and they want attention. He said this with regard to the interred past, but I think he possibly meant more’. This ‘uncanny, destabilizing mood’ of his books was produced by Sebald’s use of photographs, which seem to appear in service of testimony until one notices ‘the slight fracture between the claim in the text and the photograph ... it must all be true, we think, but we know it can’t be true’. For Cole, the complex manipulations of photography traced in Chapter 4 were a manifestation of Sebald’s understanding of history: the uncanny return of the historical past in the uncanny departure of photography from testimony. But Cole’s claim that a ‘painting becomes, in Sebald’s hands, a world of enumerated wonders’ expresses a very different understanding of what art offers the novelist, one more revealing of Cole’s own embrace of art as a source of wonder than Sebald’s own sense, drawn from the Frankfurt School, that art’s redemption and swindling deception could not be separated. Cole’s simultaneous embrace and rejection of Sebald’s legacy is indicative of how contemporary writers have positioned themselves in relation to the authors discussed in this book as part of a shift towards a different set of concerns motivating novelists’ engagement with art: wonder and beauty, futurity and experimentation, and the blurring of genre boundaries, all of which are part of a concern less with specific works of art and their place in history than with a generic concept of art and the aesthetic experiences it provides.

As its title suggests, Zadie Smith’s On Beauty (2005) shares Cole’s interest in painting as a source of aesthetic wonder, and the novel’s treatment of the art historian Howard Belsey historicizes this as a reaction against the hermeneutics of suspicion that came to dominate the Anglo-American academy
in the 1980s and 1990s in art history as much as literary studies. Belsey’s disenchanting revelation to his students in his classes on Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* that ‘Art is the Western myth’ reads like a caricature of the kind of iconoclastic cultural Marxism pioneered by Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, a caricature because it ignores the more doubtful approaches open to art as a form of redemption this book has used a study of Berger’s fiction to trace.\(^4\) The novel’s use of *The Anatomy Lesson* also highlights the difference of Smith’s denigration of suspicion in favour of beauty and Sebald’s more dialectical exposition of the painting in *The Rings of Saturn*—a comparison which can help to bring to light the possible blind-spots in Smith and Cole’s turn towards art in search of epiphanies of beauty. In a 2008 essay on ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, Smith showed that these were blind-spots of which she is well aware, and used a different art historical archive to make her point. The ‘lyrical realism’ which she sees as dominating mainstream contemporary fiction offers a ‘relentlessly aestheticized’ version of the world with a suspiciously ‘many beauties’ in which it is difficult to have much faith because of the difference of our present from the nineteenth-century context in which such lyrical realism originated. Beauty can mask an anachronism of style: this loss of the relationship between form and historical change is Smith’s problem with lyrical realism. This historical lag has not been a problem in visual art: ‘The received wisdom of literary history is that *Finnegans Wake* did not fundamentally disturb Realism’s course as Duchamp’s urinal disturbed Realism in the visual arts’.\(^5\) The novel she sees as taking the other and now more necessary path of the novel towards experimentation, Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005), takes as much from Duchamp as from Derrida, she suggests, drawing attention to McCarthy’s self-presentation as part of the parodic avant-garde collective, the International Necronautical Society (INS). Indeed, Smith’s sense that conceptual and post-conceptual art can provide an archive for formal experimentation has been taken up by other novelists in works such as Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* (2013), Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* (2014), and Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014). In Smith’s attempt to chart a direction away from lyrical realism, art is used to chart the future rather than the history of the novel.
Tom McCarthy has made this attraction explicit: ‘I’m a writer through and through, but the art world—to a large extent—provides the arena in which literature can be vigorously addressed, transformed, and expanded’. Speaking about one of the projects of his INS, he has said it was ‘a totally literary exercise; but, again, art was the space in which it could be realized and experienced’. Engaging with art also enables what McCarthy has declared as one of his main goals: ‘The task for contemporary literature is to deal with the legacy of modernism. I’m not trying to be modernist, but to navigate the wreckage of that project’. As Justus Nieland has written, McCarthy’s fixation upon modernism only serves to emphasize his distance from it: ‘McCarthy’s work stands not as the empty resuscitation of an avant-garde idiom but as its crypt, as a way of presiding over modernism’s death by re-enacting it traumatically, by lingering in the remains of its most fecund catastrophes, which are also those of the twentieth-century itself’. One exemplary figure in McCarthy’s media-driven history of catastrophic modernism is Beckett, who makes a failed appearance in Remainder. When the narrator and Naz hold auditions to find actors for their re-enactment, an actor arrives who had ‘prepared a passage to perform for us: some piece of modern theatre by Samuel Beckett. “We don’t want to hear that”, I said. “We just want to chat for a while, fill you in on what you’ll need to do”’. Beckett’s appearance in McCarthy’s novel highlights the difference in how art mediates each writer’s relationship to modernism. The difference between Beckett and McCarthy, and between the writers discussed in this book and their contemporary successors, is that for the former visual art provided an instance of the continuation of modernism in ways which complicated notions of periodicity. For the latter, modernist art belongs to a conventionally periodized past era now needing to be recuperated or re-enacted. As David James and Urmila Seshagiri have pointed out, the ways in which McCarthy and contemporary writers are ‘reactivating’ modernism assumes modernism as a discretely periodized cultural moment: ‘Without a temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers’. If this book has shown the role played by visual modernism in producing novelists’ sense of modernism as something past, it has also aimed to show how ambiguous this
modernism was for postwar writers, the source of aesthetic and political problems as well as possibilities, something very different than the canon of value it has come to be for figures like McCarthy.
Art does not occupy a place of unquestioned value in these recent debates among novelists about the future of fiction. In 2002 Jonathan Franzen used an essay on Gaddis as a manifesto justifying his turn to what he called ‘conventional fiction, driven by substantial characters and based on a soul-to-soul Contract between reader and writer’—the lyrical realism based on nineteenth-century modes that causes Smith so much unease. The opposite of his ‘conservative and conventional’ fiction is ‘[d]ifficult fiction of the kind epitomized by Gaddis’, fiction based on ‘the notion of formal experimentation as an act of resistance’. For Franzen, the aesthetic politics of Gaddis’s work, and that of authors from Flaubert to Woolf and Beckett, are based on a number of fallacies, among them ‘the Fallacy of Art Historicism, a pedagogical convenience borrowed from the moneyed world of visual art, where a work’s value substantially depends on its novelty; as if fiction were as formally free as painting, as if what makes The Great Gatsby and O Pioneers! good novels were primarily their technical innovations’. In his attack on the assumption that forms of visual art need to be historicized in order to provide new models for innovation in fiction, Franzen ironically shares more with Beckett and Gaddis—and indeed Smith—than he might like. Franzen’s essay on Gaddis sparked a lengthy riposte from Ben Marcus, setting out the stakes of a debate about literary innovation in contemporary American fiction, and it is part of Franzen’s broader belief in the incompatibility of literary and visual culture. As he solemnly declared in ‘The Reader in Exile’ (1995): ‘A few months ago, I gave away my television set’. Franzen’s problem is not so much with popular as with visual culture, the ‘shift from a culture based on the printed word to a culture based on virtual images’, which leads to ‘the eclipse of the cultural authority that literature once possessed’. There is no necessary correlation between visual art and experimentation, or between modernist visual forms and a rejection of realism: stated like this, the absurdity of the equation is evident. But in these debates about the future of contemporary fiction, visual art has come to stand as a marker (often rhetorical) for the kind of formal experimentation the contemporary novel is seen to be lacking.

If Cole’s essay on Sebald pinpointed one way in which visual art can facilitate this kind of experimentation—recasting both the novel’s relationship to history and the reader’s experience
of the novel as an experience of wonder—his praise of John Berger’s writing shows another way in which an engagement with visual art is informing formal innovation in contemporary fiction. ‘Berger’s Here Is Where We Meet’, Cole has said, ‘is actually one of my favourite books, it’s actually something that influenced me very strongly and I really love his writing’. In a review of Berger’s Bento’s Sketchbook (2011), Cole described it as ‘consisting of the mixture of anecdote, essay, politics, reverie, and poetry that he has been exploring for more than half a century’. The blurring of genre boundaries between art writing, autobiography, and fiction present in Berger’s work since the 1950s is what makes his work important to Cole, a genre blurring that Cole has elsewhere specified as stemming from his own training as an art historian. Ben Lerner has similarly identified Berger’s writing across and between genres as ‘tremendously important to me’. Echoing Cole and Smith’s sense that turning to art can recuperate an investigation into aesthetic experience, Lerner has also written: ‘All of Berger’s work—which includes poems, novels, drawings, paintings, and screenwriting—is to me a beautiful and bracing argument that political commitment requires maintaining a position of wonder’. The porous boundary between Berger’s art essays and his fiction is for Lerner one predecessor of what he identifies as a characteristic tendency of recent fiction: the investigation of ‘the fact-fiction border’. In a review of Lerner’s 10:04 (2014), Hari Kunzru hazarded to name this tendency ‘an emerging genre, the novel after Sebald, its 19th-century furniture of plot and character dissolved into a series of passages, held together by occasional photographs and a subjectivity that (p.171) hovers close to (but is never quite identical with) the subjectivity of the writer’. As similar instances he cites the work of Teju Cole, Geoff Dyer, Chris Krauss’s I Love Dick (1997), and Sheila Heti’s How Should a Person Be? (2013). What these works also have in common is that they all draw, in different degrees, on visual art as subject or formal model: the novel after Sebald might also then be called the novel after art. Although objections could be made to Kunzru’s attempt to make these similarities into a genealogy, his remarks capture an important shift in the role that engaging with art is having on contemporary fiction. Rather than reflections on art being used to rethink the relationship of the novel as a genre to its historical context, essayistic writing about art is being merged into fictional
writing in order to escape from the generic constraints of the novel itself.

In the debates and writings of these contemporary authors, the relationships this book has traced between novelists’ engagements with art and the ways in which they conceptualized a novel’s place in history no longer seem to hold. Rather than Beckett’s turn to the borders of modernist abstraction as a model for the necessities of form vomiting up against the necessities of historical teleology, we have McCarthy’s turn to the modernist avant-garde of the past as the decaying seed-bed for the novel of the future. Rather than the sense shared in different ways by Gaddis, Berger, and Sebald, that visual art’s relationship to times other than the present needed to be taken up by the novel’s own political engagements with history, Smith, Cole, and Lerner see art as offering politically salient experiences of the presence of wonder in a present exhausted by disenchantment. This turn from a preoccupation with history to a concern with the present is part of what Peter Boxall has identified as a larger shift that has taken place in contemporary fiction since the turn of the millennium. ‘The writers of the new century’, he argues, ‘register this sense that the time of the new century has suddenly become alien and strange, that it requires of us a new kind of time sense’.22 In the same way that this book has argued that an apparent waning of historicity only served to motivate more complex means of its recovery in and through novelistic responses to art, so too the sudden emergence of temporality as a topic of concern for theorists and writers alike might prompt new engagements with art as a means to explore this new kind of time sense.
Yet at the same time, the authors discussed in this book have become touchstones for contemporary debates about the form and function of fiction in the present. Beckett, Gaddis, Berger, and Sebald have become (p.172) part of the literary history of postwar novelists like Cole or Smith are constructing as the foundation, or point of departure, for their own literary endeavours. The contemporary historicization of these writers, and their engagement with art, has been one justification for the methodology of this book. If we are to understand the diverse and complex ways in which postwar novelists responded to visual art, these engagements need to be approached historically: sensitive to the fine-grain of the contexts in which these responses took place, and to the nuances of the art works and aesthetic concepts that mediated and enabled them. By showing how visual art was a means by which postwar writers historicized their present, this book has shown the inseparability of art and history in the poetics of postwar fiction, and their centrality to the interpretation of that fiction.

But as this book has also argued, the histories of art are multiple, non-simultaneous, and often generatively out of sync with the formal and institutional histories of literature. This divergence has meant that for these novelists, thinking historically through art has been as much about linking moments across historical time as about slotting past and present into a linear continuum. In that spirit, then, we might view this recent concern with the time sense of the present, and the role of art in investigating that time sense, not as characterizing a new or successive period in literary history—so that ‘the postwar’ is followed by ‘the contemporary’ like beads on a string—but as a continuation in a different key of art’s role in providing writers a means of thinking about their time. After all, attention to the quality of time hardly means a flight from history. Quite the opposite, as the narrator of Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) makes clear: ‘We live in time, it bounds us and defines us, and time is supposed to measure history, isn’t it? But if we can’t understand time, can’t grasp its mysteries of pace and progress, what chance do we have with history?’ With this recognition of art’s continuing role in providing writers with a grasp on the history of their present and their present role in history, it is time to take Barnes’s prompt and move from the sense of an ending to a real one.
Conclusion

Notes:

(1) Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 44; 52


(3) Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, 52; 82.


(20) Berger, ‘Bookforum Talks with Ben Lerner’.


(22) Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22


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