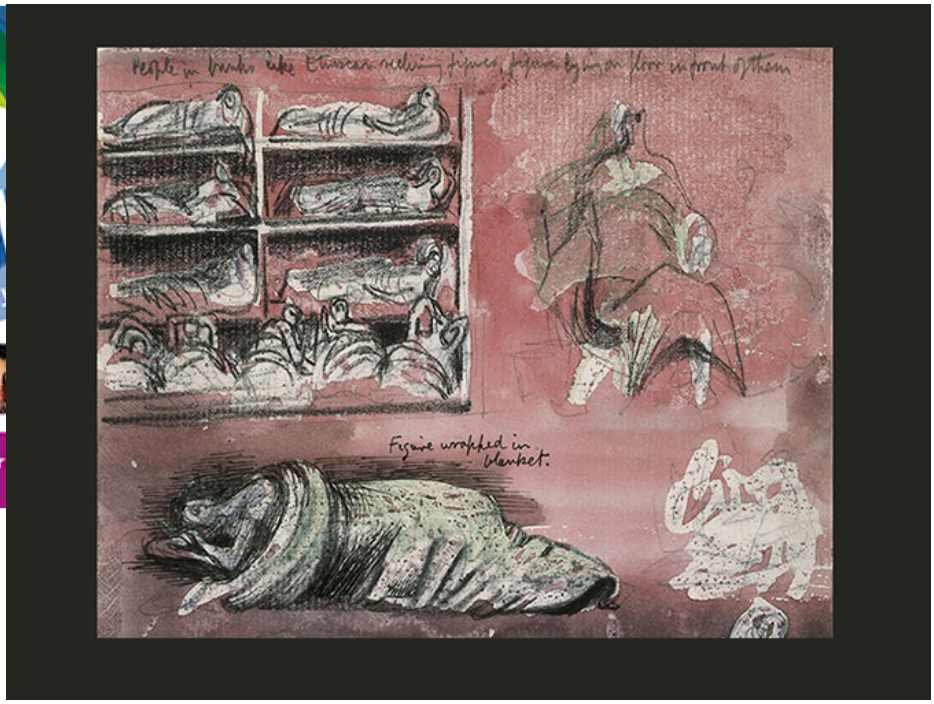
LITERARY CRITICISM FEBRUARY 8 2017



"Refugees in the Underground" (1941) by Henry Moore
© Iberfoto/Mary Evans Picture Library 2015;

Thomas S. Davis
THE EXTINCT SCENE
Late Modernism and everyday life
328pp. Columbia University Press. £44 (US $60).

Ordinary oblivion

DAVID JAMES

"The Past", Elizabeth Bowen wrote in 1942, has become "private just as much as historical." Indeed, it appeared to her "now to matter more than ever: it acquires meaning; it loses false mystery. In the savage and austere light of a burning world, details leap out with significance". How to evoke history's renewed invasion of public and private spheres without turning away from the particularity of those seemingly everyday "details" was one of the tasks that later Modernist writers confronted. Showing how and why they did so is what Thomas S. Davis embarks on in his brilliant book. He has chosen, however, an increasingly slippery phenomenon as his frame: for some, such as Tyrus Miller, "Late Modernism" is a discrete, inter-war phase of literary history, characterized by specific, often-satiric responses to the vaunted ambitions of earlier trailblazers from the 1920s. For others, such as Jed Esty, Julian Jordon and Peter Kalliney, it is infinitely more capacious – at least in a British context – stretching well into the 60s and germane to a new wave of experimentalists including George Lamming, B. S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, even J. G. Ballard. Late Modernism is hardly the sole preserve of literature and its coordinates shift depending on which discipline or media you are speaking of. But whatever one's focal object, Late Modernism continues to circulate as an implicitly periodizing category in its own right. And for this reason, it seems most useful when it is not too flabby: when it is not simply an excuse for extending Modernism

haphazardly into the post-war era or for unfairly displacing postmodernism; and when it doesn't become the condescending label for later twentieth-century writers, "belated" offshoots of a once fervent era of originality.

Davis seems well aware of this conceptual minefield. He wants "to produce a version of late modernism elastic enough" to embrace the late work of Virgina Woolf and the documentary films of John Grierson, yet "focused enough to pull into view the reciprocal relationship between aesthetics and world- systemic change". He combines an analysis of world-historical events and close readings of transitions in visual and literary technique to reveal, in his neat phrase, a politically alert "outward turn".

The orientation of this turn was most conspicuously angled at the humdrum, experiential matter of daily life. Davis suggests that "late modernism's fascination with the everyday discloses an uneasy relationship between the epistemological claims of realism and the aesthetic resources of Modernism", a hunch he elaborates across an ambitious corpus that roves beyond literature to examine advances in documentary film in the work of Humphrey Jennings and Basil Wright, while also taking in responses to European conflict from Christopher Isherwood to W. H. Auden, and the threat of oblivion shaping ordinary life as evoked by the "war gothic" stories of Bowen and by Henry Moore's sketches.

Davis is keen to rethink the relationship between Modernist innovation and realism, with its perceived mimetic commitment to social reality, as one of flux – of mutual interpenetration. At the same time, he warns against the temptation to regard border-crossing concepts as somehow inherently progressive. Instead, he recommends that "the point is not to put periodizing or stylistic categories on trial or to assume righteously that fluid boundaries and pluralized modernisms and realisms are inherently better". Equally shrewd is his self-imposed premiss that "the artwork should not be cast solely as a privileged site of resistance or transgression". Accordingly, in his chapter on the avant-garde techniques of Mass-Observation and documentary film in the 30s, Davis considers the impulse not so much to dissent from contemporary culture through radical experimentation as to "establish consensus, merge the advances and potentiality of art with the social and political order, and remake art's social function into one of compatibility, not antagonism". It is this kind of care – when reassessing the social potential of artistic ideas emerging in the context of global upheaval – that allows Davis to avoid overstating the critical efficacy of writers, who were trying to register in the small-scale fluctuations of ordinary life the ramifications of geopolitical instability.

Moving beyond the mid-century, Davis's final chapter turns to the political possibilities for former and soon-to-be-former colonies after the war, observing how writers such as Colin MacInnes, Victor Stafford Reid and Sam Selvon depicted the "anxieties of everyday life initiated by decolonization and migration". His deft readings of formal invention and vernacular idioms in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Reid's *New Day* (1949) forge "a relationship between the figurations of political belonging happening in the spheres of political theory, legislative debate and the mass media, and the everyday lives of marginalized and dispossessed populations". Though at the time critically praised for their anthropological accuracy – in effect, for their urban realism – "none of these writers", as Davis rightly points out, "set out to be social documentarians", but instead "to draw attention to the way vernaculars shape and portray daily experience", turning them into a vitalizing source for novels. In works that "privilege linguistic innovation over ethnographic fidelity", the writers of this West Indian "literary renaissance" performed "active imaginings of the consequences and possibilities of emergent forms of political belonging".

What's stimulating about Davis's dexterous readings – something that is evident throughout the book, but crystallized in the closing chapter – is that he treats fiction as a type of social modelling, as a vehicle for commentary on citizenship and as an agent of cultural analysis. Rather than simply

commending them for simulating compelling impressions of daily life in alienating and frequently racist environments, he urges us to see how immigrant writers of these early post-war years enact political work by situating them alongside such thinkers as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Léopold Senghor. By syncing novelists and philosophers in a common cause, he sees "the possibilities of decolonization and postcolonial nationhood within the emerging bipolar, Cold War world".

Davis brings a new level of archival density and diversity – from Mass-Observation to the *Windrush* generation – to bear on conversations about Modernism and the way we relate global events to the developing variety and social agility of aesthetic form throughout this convulsive era.