Consciousness in the Balance

THOMAS S. DAVIS, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2016), pp. 328, cloth, $60.00.

Georg Lukács didn't like modernism very much. Of course, he didn't like expressionism or avant-garde art either (generally for the same reasons). Most of his arguments against modernism boiled down to this: while realism is capable of representing socioeconomic totality, modernism isn't. Modernist literature is too self-involved—too subjective and inward looking and formally experimental—to represent objective reality. And therefore it can't be politically meaningful or effective. As he wrote in "Realism in the Balance" (1938), "The taxing struggle to understand the art of the 'avant-garde' . . . yields such subjectivist distortions and travesties that ordinary people who try to translate these atmospheric echoes of reality back into the language of their own experience, find the task quite beyond them" (57). Over the past eighty years, this claim has been subject to withering criticism. A lot of this criticism, I think, was right. But essays like "Realism in the Balance" and "Reportage or Portrayal" (1932) are still essential reading. Their value lies less in their judgments about modernism and realism, perhaps, than in their framing—the ways they outline the potential relations between aesthetics, politics, and problems of mind. Lukács might have disliked modernism, but his framework for talking about modernist literature has become indispensable.

Thomas S. Davis's *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* builds on that framework in provocative ways. It is also a new and noteworthy account of the complicated aesthetic networks of interwar Britain, analyzing everything from fiction and poetry to documentary film and the writings of the Mass Observation movement. If high modernism was a turn inward, Davis suggests, late modernism was a turn outward—a "dialectical twist in the long trajectory of modernist aesthetics" toward the external world (4). Faced with crises and catastrophes at a global scale, modernist writers found new possibilities in exteriority itself, particularly representations of everyday life. Such representations, Davis claims, "serve as mediated expressions of world-system disorder and its far reaching consequences" (ibid.). On this point, Davis echoes certain aspects of "Realism in the Balance." But *The Extinct Scene* isn't just Lukács by way of Immanuel Wallerstein. For Davis, both realism and modernism remain useful terms—if not as dialectically opposed periods then as competing "styles" or modes (13). And during the moment of late modernism, writers drew on both of these styles as they attempted to connect the immediate experiences of everyday life with the collapse of the British economic world system.

This stylistic eclecticism is at the heart of *The Extinct Scene*'s first chapter, "The Last Snapshot of the British Intelligentsia: Documentary, Mass Observation, and the Fate of the Liberal Avant-Garde." In the 1930s and 1940s, there was a surge of interest in recording the everyday experiences of ordinary British citizens. But according to Davis, such efforts—including the films of John Grierson and the autoethnographies of Mass Observation—did more than merely document these experiences. Instead, they borrowed techniques from the avant-garde to inculcate support for the political and economic interests of the British state. This was particularly salient in a film such as *Song of Ceylon* (1934), which was produced by

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Grierson, directed by Basil Wright, and made for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board. While Wright's film "gained wide acclaim for its inventive, asynchronic sound and its use of montage," it also "showed British interests in Ceylon as benevolent, causing no interruption in what it perceived to be the traditional rhythms of Ceylonese life" (41). Mass Observation's publications, which included *May the Twelfth* (1937) and *War Begins At Home* (1940), followed a similar trajectory. As Davis explains, the founders of Mass Observation, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, repurposed surrealist techniques of "defamiliarization and montage" to represent the collective experiences of ordinary citizens. Surrealism's revolutionary politics, however, weren't part of the program. "By uncovering multiple publics and arranging them in a kind of textual collage," Davis writes, *War Begins at Home* "averts any kind of closure, a strategy bound to a utopic projection of liberal democracy thriving on some kind of openness without end" (60).

There are no utopic or even optimistic projections in *The Extinct Scene*'s second chapter, "The Historical Novel at History's End." Instead, Davis suggests that Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937) and Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1940) play with the conventions of historical fiction to "render the protracted decline of a British-centered world-system as a crisis of historical consciousness" (69). As Davis acknowledges, any identification of these novels with historical fiction requires a flexible definition of the genre—or at least more flexible than Lukács's definition in *The Historical Novel* (1937). It's through their deployment of the historical novel's tropes that *The Years* and *Goodbye to Berlin* manage to put daylight between narratives of historical progress and history itself. As they "conceptualize a philosophy of history at its moment of unraveling," Davis argues, both texts excavate the origins of such historical disorder through their representations of everyday life (73). In *The Years*, the juxtaposition of experiences from World War I with those of the 1930s "forecloses any possibility of historical progress" (82). Instead of interrupting history, the war is shown to constitute and exemplify history. Similarly, Davis suggests that *Goodbye to Berlin*'s fragmented narration of the Weimar Republic represents the rise of fascism as posing an impossible challenge to "narrative totality" (103). At the end of history, it isn't just the historical novel that erodes but narrative cohesion itself.

Turning away from the world wars, the chapter "Late Modernism's Geopolitical Imagination: Everyday Life in the Global Hot Zones" examines how British writers in the 1930s reacted to violence occurring elsewhere in the world. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and W. H. Auden and Isherwood's *Journey to a War* (1939) went far beyond the work of travel writing. Instead, Davis argues, these books used figures of everyday life to uncover the geopolitical, conceptual, and ethical messiness of total war. By the end of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War was seen as an allegory for other phenomena—including the rise of fascism in Europe and a more general fight between "light/darkness, good/evil, and right/wrong" (121). For Orwell, such allegorical thinking diminished the particularity and significance of the republican struggle. And yet, as Davis suggests, *Homage to Catalonia* was entirely reliant on this kind of ethical abstraction. As much as *Homage to Catalonia* works to "dismantle the war allegory," it can't justify Franco's death without "those very metaphysical abstractions categoriz[ing] the Fascist as the avatar of radical evil" (123). In *Journey to a War*, Auden and Isherwood faced a different kind of dilemma. These writers felt that, compared to England or Spain, China was fundamentally unknowable. Because of its relations with Japan and Europe as well the complexities of its own imperial history, Auden and Isherwood were unable to "conceptualize" China as "a geographical and historical totality"

(131). And this is precisely what the different segments of *Journey to a War* perform—the ever-widening gap between everyday experience and the conceptual structures available to make sense of that experience.

The Extinct Scene's fourth chapter returns to England and to World War II. And much like the second chapter's expansion of historical fiction, "Gothic War" shows how Henry Moore's subway sketches and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945) seized on the gothic to register concerns about Britain's survival. "War," Davis argues, "induces a dialectical change in the figural work of the gothic" (145). While we normally associate the gothic with horror and fantasy, the realities of war necessarily change our expectations of the everyday. In effect, violence and death become commonplace, even mundane. This suffusion of realism with gothic elements runs through Moore's drawings of the London Underground during the blitz. Initially just "active disfiguration[s]" of *The Picture Post*'s photos of "The People's War," Moore's sketches evolved into ghostly, spectral representations of those seeking shelter underground. "Moore's series of drawings," Davis observes, "transform the Tube from a place of protection and refuge into a potential mass grave" (153). Bowen's *The Demon Lover* also proceeds from this gothic landscape, juxtaposing bombed-out cities with anxieties about cultural renewal and decline. "As time wore on and as people gazed at the ruins," Davis writes, "they dreamed of reconstruction in terms of dramatic social change" (172). But in *The Demon Lover*, this future is greeted cautiously, with gothic figures inserting older Anglo-Irish concerns into new fantasies of egalitarianism. "Like the tales of sinister uncles or vampires of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish gothic," Davis argues, "Bowen's stories function as expressions of property-loss, class-leveling, and a coming redistribution of wealth and power" (182).

But what, precisely, *The Extinct Scene* asks, had the war "bombed into existence" (185)? In his fifth and final chapter, "'It is de age of colonial concern': Vernacular Fictions and Political Belonging," Davis turns to black British literature of the postwar period. As enabled by the British Nationality Act of 1948, hundreds of thousands of Commonwealth citizens—mostly from South Asia and the Caribbean—settled in Britain between 1948 and 1962. But many of those immigrants struggled with complicated senses of national and political affiliation. Davis argues that novels such as Vic Reid's *New Day* (1949), Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), and Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1958) created synthetic English vernaculars to address this issue of political belonging. (While MacInnes himself was not an immigrant, Davis notes, *Absolute Beginners* has been praised for its representations of the Windrush generation.) "In part," each of these novels "aimed to draw attention to the ways vernaculars shape and portray daily experience" (200)—with each language serving as a unique register for the difficulties faced by black British immigrants. According to Davis, these synthetic languages also constituted an opportunity for these novels to reveal their own modernist affiliations, using techniques such as "juxtaposition, interior monologue, stream of consciousness and code-switching" (188) to figure the tensions between immigrant life and the regime of Standard English. Through linguistic and formal experimentation, these novels effectively reimagined the conditions and possibilities of political belonging in the postwar period. In its epilogue, "Appointments to Keep in the Past," *The Extinct Scene* extends its arguments about late modernism even further—into the first years of the twenty-first century. For Davis, a novel such as W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* also finds signs of historical disorder and world-systems failure in its memories of everyday life. But *Austerlitz* is decidedly forlorn—even when compared to Moore's drawings or the fiction of Woolf and

Bowen. "If art can still transform the everyday into signs of history," Davis concludes, "Sebald's novel worries that we may have arrived too late to read them" (231).

That might have been Sebald's worry about history, but it doesn't need to be ours. For literary critics, *The Extinct Scene* raises other important and difficult questions. Which is to say, if literary history progresses dialectically, then shouldn't the history of criticism do so too? In its examination of how world-systems disorder might manifest itself aesthetically but also of its emphasis on modernist formal experimentation, *The Extinct Scene* is a necessary step toward synthesis—toward criticism talking about interiority and exteriority simultaneously and with equal precision. Whether we are talking about one literature's turn inward or another literature's turn outward, the goal isn't to exclude either "consciousness" or "world-system" but rather to unfold the logical, formal, and historical relations between the two. To return to Lukács's "Realism in the Balance," it isn't necessarily the job of literature to connect "subjectivist" and "atmospheric echoes of reality" back to the external world. But it is very much the job of criticism.

JOSHUA GANG, *University of California, Berkeley*

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JOSHUA GANG is assistant professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and currently at work on a book manuscript, "Word and Mind: Behaviorism and Literary Modernity."

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