

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Pyramids at the Louvre* by Glenn Watkins

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 136, No. 1823 (Jan., 1995), pp. 36-37

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1003282>

Accessed: 25-06-2017 15:56 UTC

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PYRAMIDS AT THE LOUVRE

Glenn Watkins

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (Harvard 1994); ix, 571pp; £23.95. ISBN 0674 74083 1.

Post-modernism is a strange place indeed, somewhere between Lilliput and California. Those who have looked upon it return, if at all, with a strange gleam in their eye, babbling of a new world where image and reality are the same, where up is the same as down, the past the same as the present and the future, where East is West, high is low, good is bad. Some of these travellers are horrified by what they've seen, others entranced. But one thing they're agreed on is that everyday reality can never be the same again. Everything – and that means everything – must be 'seen anew'. One of these ardent proselytes declares that post-modernism means a release from the shackles of theory – and 'It is only in the refusal to be answerable to a governing theory that thought, and above all theoretical thought, becomes possible once more'.¹ This will come as a shock to those of us who thought we'd been thinking all along – but then we haven't been there, we haven't glimpsed the promised land.

Glenn Watkins has been there, and he likes what he saw. But he's no pushover. He is used to negotiating swampy territory – after all, this is the man who spent years in the study of Gesualdo, and then wrote an excellent book on him, all without apparent ill-effect. To do this for post-modernism means keeping a cool head and resisting the siren voices of the post-modern theorists, which drive men – and indeed persons of all genders – mad and lead them to perdition. Of course it's Watkins' refusal to discuss post-modernism in its own opaque terms that makes him, in many people's eyes, unfit to treat the subject at all. In the opening pages of the book Watkins confesses to 'a general sense of dismay at much of the circularity surrounding the concept of post-modernism.' His approach is to side-step the concept and examine the

phenomenon itself – post-modern art and music – with the aid of tools borrowed from critical writing on modernism. He feels justified in doing this because for him, post-modernism grows out of and in a sense depends on, modernism. 'The story that emerges here... announces neither the demise of Modernism nor its retrospective failure. Rather it tries to clarify the various ways in which Modernism served as a natural conduit to, and claimed continued residency in, a Postmodern age.'

The tools Watkins borrows from the literature on modernism are useful, descriptive categories, such as primitivism, cubism, and above all collage. They lack the grandeur of fully-fledged concepts, but they have the great advantage of possessing a concrete existence independent of the concept they're called on to exemplify. Because of this they're publically testable, and arguable. We can observe Watkins trying to apply his categories to John Adams, to Schnittke, or to Li Pei's pyramid outside the Louvre, and judge for ourselves whether the transference works. In short, Watkins's book is, despite its trendy-looking cover, an exercise in old-fashioned criticism that might be called 'humanist' if that hadn't become a dirty word. Watkins says as much himself when he describes the book as 'an affectionate attempt to return to the musicological discourse many of the approaches that have been somewhat aggressively strained out in recent years.'

By necessity, then, much of the book is given over to modernism. True to his methodological modesty, Watkins doesn't seek for any single essence of modernism in art. Instead he treats it as the coincidence, in a certain portion of the globe at a certain period of history, of a handful of creative preoccupations and procedures. He begins with orientalism, a term he borrows from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, though it's used here without any of Said's polemical anger. Rather than seeing orientalism as an expression of Western colonialism, Watkins treats it as one manifestation of a

more general urge in modernism to find the authentic 'Other', a mode of being that lies beyond, or before, the Western tradition. There are other routes back to this *fons et origo*. One goes via African art, another through ancient Slavic art, yet another via Oceania. This is familiar territory, but Watkins makes it seem new, partly by uncovering new areas within it – the section on primitivism, for example, includes a fascinating discussion of American Indian art, which became known in Europe when troupes of dancers were seen on tour (this explains those puzzling costumes for the dancers at the first performance of *The rite of spring*, which were certainly more Indian than Slavic).

But the real value of the book lies in the intricate network of cross-fertilisations and syntheses it reveals between things we're used to thinking of in isolation. Watkins is an assiduous and enthusiastic cultural detective, adept at ferreting out the obscure lineage of an idea. For example, he shows how Bakst's studies of Attic vases provided a whole repertory of gestures for Nijinsky when he came to choreograph *L'après-midi d'un faun*. The most surprising liaisons are revealed by Watkins' indefatigable labours. Who would have imagined a link between Nancy Cunard, the society heiress who became a proselyte for African art, and George Antheil, the 'bad boy' of American music? But there it is, detailed on p.173, where there's a long quotation from an article Antheil wrote for Nancy Cunard's magazine *Negro*. My favourite of all these unexpected liaisons is the startling revelation that Schoenberg and Shirley Temple lived across the same street in Los Angeles. Did they ever meet? And if they did, what might they have talked about? Watkins is not a man to shirk difficult topics, but this mind-boggling encounter defeats even his powers of cross-cultural criticism.

Enthusiastic and genial guide though Watkins is, the sheer profusion of personalities and events can get a bit wearying. Sometimes you wish he'd left some stones unturned. And it has to be said that Watkins' prose style is not felicitous: 'Such



polyfocal perspectives prospered under freshly coloured banners of relativity in both science and art' is a typical specimen. The alliteration adds a touch of comedy, but otherwise it's leaden stuff to read. He also has a habit of linking a sentence to its predecessor by beginning 'Too, ...' which for me produces a visceral sense of discomfort. But despite this, the book held me throughout its considerable length. It's especially illuminating when the argument shifts up a level, so to speak, from describing links within a modernist category to describing links between them. So primitivism and an interest in mechanism can be connected via African music. Cubism and serialism are linked through 'simultaneity', the presentation of an object from all possible angles at once. The person who emerges as the hub where many of these spokes meet is Stravinsky, a name which recurs more than any other. Watkins' discussion of his friendship with Albert Gleizes, the leading theorist of cubism, and the telling correspondence between Gleizes' ideas and Stravinsky's serial procedures, is first-rate.

By the time we reach the two-thirds mark, one guiding theme has emerged. This is the notion of 'collage', which Watkins takes to be central to both modernism and post-modernism. At this point the inclusion of what had seemed a distracting side-issue, namely the American-ness of American culture, suddenly becomes clear. American music, for reasons that were largely historical, was a 'Grand Collage' of the social, artistic and political events that occurred between 1900 and 1950.

The big question raised by this notion is: what makes a post-modern collage different to a modernist one? Noticing the way Li Pei's Pyramids outside the Louvre museum refuse to blend with their surroundings, Watkins observes that 'this quality of 'insert' on classic terrain has

become an increasingly perceivable dimension of post-modernist collage.' His *locus classicus* of an insert is the cadenza, a post-modern device '*avant la lettre*', which only in recent years has fully woken up to its anomalous position. Schnittke's cadenza for the Beethoven violin concerto is an insert made of inserts, i.e., bits lifted from the great violin concertos from Mendelssohn to Bartók. Watkins says that this cadenza 'invites the listener to review the history of the violin concerto in terms of the authority of the past.'

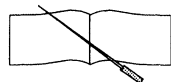
But what authority does the past have if the things it contains can be put into any context, however alien, without regard for the values they once embodied? It's this promiscuous attitude to the past, which treats tradition as a repository of picturesque objects ripe for consumption, which has brought such damning judgements on post-modernist art. Watkins acknowledges that 'claims abound that the post-modern mode has gradually yielded to a telling transition from resonating parody to faceless imitation,' but he will have none of this pessimism. A *propos* William Albright's Concerto for harpsichord and strings he declares that 'the blank parody and inherent neutrality attributed to Postmodernist pastiche by Frederic Jameson is nowhere in sight, and the claim that the "new age aesthetic" has brought about not only the death of the subject but the dissolution of personality is laid bare as a myth'. This determined optimism goes hand-in-hand with the rejection of the critical literature on modernism, which is mostly deeply pessimistic in tone. Jameson is hardly mentioned, Baudrillard not at all.

This might not matter, were it not for the fact that Watkins' engagement with the actual material of post-modern art is so slight. By far the bulk of the book is given over to defining the modernist variety of collage, and the categories

which fed into it such as primitivism and cubism. Toward the end of the book Watkins hints that modernism provides the standards to which post-modernism must aspire; but the examples of post-modern art are few on the ground, and with the sole exception of the Schnittke cadenza, they don't get the detailed treatment Watkins brings to bear on modernist art. What's more, they're tendentiously chosen to illustrate their lofty modernist parentage. Albright is highlighted because he so clearly basks in the reflected glory of Stravinsky. The problem with this approach is that the possibility that post-modernism might be radically different to modernism can't really be raised, because it's always defined in terms of its parent. And if that parent is so exalted, how can the child ever measure up to it? This is the trap Watkins has unwittingly prepared for himself, and in the last chapter we see him struggling to get out of it. He's determined to be up-beat about post-modernism's 'newly-sighted possibilities' and the enticing prospects opened up by 'musical transculturation'. But he feels duty-bound to invoke the stern Father in the shape of Boulez, whose injunction to 'volatalize history' is quoted to justify the wayward eclecticism and quotation-mania of the post-modernists. This won't wash, and I suspect Watkins knows it. The truth is that the picture he paints of the modernist age is so magnificent that, as the author says, it 'makes us wonder if the world will see the likes of such a time again'. If that's true – and this ambitious and impressive book will surely persuade you that it is – then post-modernism is bound to seem like a terrible anti-climax.

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1. Thomas Docherty: *After theory* (Routledge, 1990).



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