

Frost, Laura. *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents*. Pp. 304. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. Paperback format published 2015. UK £17.50 / US \$25.00. ISBN: 9780231152730.

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Nothing, one might argue, could be further from popular romance than literary modernism. On the one hand, we have a type of writing intimately concerned with both representing and eliciting pleasure in a reader, whose material conditions of production are commonly aligned with mass readerships, and whose literary strategies include the recursive repetition of well-loved plots and favoured character types. Apparently at odds with this type of literary production is the elitist, coterie, avant-garde experimentation of literary modernism. T.S. Eliot, George Steiner, and William Empson all sang the praises of difficulty (Frost 20), and followed by Lionel Trilling's 1963 identification of modernist literature with 'unpleasure', critics have commonly located modernism's signal aesthetic practices in the discomfiting, disturbing, or unpleasant. A steady stream of critical works have emerged in the past two decades that seek to characterise, categorise, and map the "new affective terrain of modernity" (Flatley 4) and modernism. As Sianne Ngai has persuasively shown, the modernist period ushers in, with a new intensity, a concern with the representation not of noble or uplifting affects, but of "ugly feelings" – disgust, boredom, irritation, and shame. For every Clarissa Dalloway experiencing the pleasures of flowers, there are more numerous Septimus Smiths, alienated and terrified, unable to cope with modernity's discombobulating transformations.

Yoked to this sense of literary modernism's denial of pleasure is its reputation as a coterie writing and reading practice. Early studies of literary modernism commonly maintained the great divide between high- and lowbrow literary productions, defensive of their texts' avant-garde status and wary of the taint of the popular. Yet in recent years, particularly in the wake of the colonizing expansion of modernist studies, scholars have begun to look more closely at the convergence of mass and elite cultures and the ways in which modernist writers "absorbed and remade forms of mass culture rather than merely disparaging them" (Mao and Walkowitz 744). A notable line of inquiry for scholars such as

Nicholas Daly (1999) and Martin Hipsky (2011) shows that the barriers between modernism and popular romance are more permeable than they appear.

Laura Frost's *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents*, an engaging study of aesthetic and affective experimentation by exemplary modernist and interwar writers, finds new gaps in the fence. As she persuasively shows, many 'highbrow' texts borrow from popular genres, from Aldous Huxley's responses to Elinor Glyn in *Brave New World* (1932), or Anita Loos's deployment of the techniques of silent film titling in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). Loos's bestseller, the subject of Frost's final chapter, has long been a subject of contention for scholars – is it modernist and ironic or a buoyant middlebrow fantasy? – and provides an opportunity for Frost to further engage with the enjoyable frissons between modernist innovation and the new pleasures of modern mass culture. That *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* could in the 1920s (as now) be simultaneously taken for lowbrow pulp and highbrow satire illustrates the tensions between mass and elite, and pleasure and unpleasure, that represent for Frost "a new way of defining literary modernism more capaciously" (14).

Though the concept of unpleasure is central to her argument, Frost suggests that, rather than its opposite, unpleasure is a "modification" of pleasure (6). Within their stylistic innovations, modernists betrayed their signal concern with pleasure: specifically, with the training of the modern subject towards the enjoyment of new types of literary pleasure. "[M]odernists claimed that the struggle with difficult texts had its own intrinsic rewards" (21), parsed in terms of the "exercise of cultural distinction" (212), which worked to compete against the "charms of vernacular culture" (21):

Modernism's contribution to the genealogy of pleasure is the declared substitution of one set of pleasures (refined, acquired, and cognitive) for another (embodied, accessible), in which the disavowal of the latter is promoted as an aesthetic principle. (22)

As Frost relates, the "double-bind" (236) in which so many modernists were tied was in accounting for mass culture as simultaneously "compelling" yet also a kind of "false consciousness" (226). To the modernists, as Frost relates, pleasure was "a force [...] run amok in contemporary culture: in the cinema, in popular literature, and in the public's enthusiasm for fun." (236) In response, modernist writers and critics deployed a battery of defensive aesthetic measures – both textual and representative – that sought to differentiate and distance both writing and reading subjects from the intoxicating effects of pleasure upon culture (Frost devotes some pages to Q.D. Leavis's salvoes against vulgar enjoyment). At the same time as it denies pleasure, though, modernism engages in the project of transforming pleasure: readers were asked not simply to "tolerate" the "hard cognitive labor" of modernist difficulty, but in fact to "embrace" it (6) – and learn to enjoy it. The reader must become a kind of masochist, willing to submit to the indignities of "discomfort, confusion" (6) and textual pain in the search for novel types of literary bliss.

In spite of their disavowal of accessible pleasure, Frost also shows how many modernist works also "participate" in the very strategies of embodied affect and desire as the popular texts they "purport [...] to reject." (13). In chapters on *Ulysses's* smells, Stein and tickling, and the "anhedonia" (164) of the novels of Patrick Hamilton and Jean Rhys, Frost traces the representation and elicitation of new types of somatic and affective

experience. For example, in a highly readable chapter on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Frost demonstrates Lawrence's attention to the textual and erotic strategies of the interwar desert romances of E.M. Hull. Hull's best-selling 1919 romance *The Sheik* was accorded extraordinary notice by both Lawrence and Q.D. Leavis, who viewed its "predictable formulas and sensational prose" as "epitomizing popular pleasure" (90). In spite of its immense presence in the popular culture of the twenties, inspiring sheet music, films starring Valentino, magazine 'true stories' and two perfumes, the interwar desert romance *a la* Hull enjoyed a relatively short-lived popularity, fizzing out (except for new spikes of interest from the 1990s within the narrower confines of popular romance fiction) sometime in the thirties. As Frost shows, however, Hull left an indelible impression upon both Lawrence and Leavis, who saw in *The Sheik* "a symptom of cultural decline" (100). In her 1932 salvo *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Leavis argues that the feeling produced by popular romances such as Hull is largely somatic, "cheap [and] mechanical", at once passive and "masturbatory" (quoted in Frost 101); such embodied experiences, if repeated, render the general reader incapable of "bear[ing] the impact of a serious novel" (quoted in Frost 100). "If popular reading is a narcotic," as Frost puts it, "modernism is bracingly therapeutic" (104).

This reading of romance as "regressive or banal" and modernism as "challenging and unfamiliar" is both itself something of a critical banality, and as Frost shows, called into question by Lawrence's own use of the bread-and-butter pleasure management strategies of popular romance fiction. However, as Frost argues, the "Hullian turn" (111) in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is designed not to elicit pleasure but to "discipline and even curtail it" (90). Tracing verbal resemblances between *The Sheik's* and *Lady Chatterley's* mutual exploration of sexualised "shame", Frost shows how Lawrence uses the same language to effect an entirely different response: where Hull's text is "arranged to make her reader swoon with arousal" (125), Lawrence's "rhetorically overshadows the sensation of pleasure" (126). In spite of the infamously pornographic reputation of his "Shame Epic", Lawrence's language of sex is designed not to provoke desire but to withhold it, "putting space between itself and the reader" (120). Yet Frost is at pains to show that it is not through the usual story of textual experimentation or difficulty beloved by Leavis that Lawrence disciplines readerly pleasure. Rather, it is by employing those techniques of popular romance writers – including "repetition, cliché and stereotype" (104) – that Lawrence is able to resituate pleasure at a point of tension between "novelty and familiarity, the shock of the new and the gratifications of the sure thing" (129).

Readers of this journal may wish Frost to have engaged more thoroughly with some of the key critical texts of popular romance studies, but her insights on the pleasures of modernist texts, and the disciplining of pleasure, should nevertheless be welcome to scholars seeking to further unpack the tensions and relationships between popular and highbrow literary production in the first half of the twentieth century.

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