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Modernity At Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad In Crisis (Theory Out Of Bounds)

Cesare Casarino

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At once a literary-philosophical meditation on the question of modernity and a manifesto for a new form of literary criticism, Modernity at Sea argues that the nineteenth-century sea narrative played a crucial role in the emergence of a theory of modernity as permanent crisis.

In a series of close readings of such works as Herman Melville's White-Jacket and Moby Dick, Joseph Conrad's The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and The Secret Sharer, and Karl Marx's Grundrisse, Cesare Casarino draws upon the thought of twentieth-century figures including Giorgio Agamben, Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, Leo Bersani, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Antonio Negri to characterize the nineteenth-century ship narrative as the epitome of Michel Foucault's "heterotopia"-a special type of space that simultaneously represents, inverts, and contests all other spaces in culture.

Elaborating Foucault's claim that the ship has been the heterotopia par excellence of Western civilization since the Renaissance, Casarino goes on to argue that the nineteenth-century sea narrative froze the world of the ship just before its disappearance-thereby capturing at once its apogee and its end, and producing the ship as the matrix of modernity.

Cesare Casarino is associate professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota.

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