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Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies (Theory and History of Literature)

Neil Larsen

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In *Modernism and Hegemony*, Neil Larsen exposes the underlying political narratives of modernist aesthetic theory and practice. Unlike earlier Marxist critics, Larsen insists that modernist ideology be approached as a "displaced politics" and not simply as an aesthetic phenomenon. In this view, modernism is broadly ideological project comprising not only the literary-artist canon but also a wide array of theoretical discourses from aesthetics to philosophy, culture, and politics. Larsen gives postmodernism some credit for the apparent breakup of modernism, and for exposing the philosophical and political nature of its aesthetic stance. But he parts company with its ideological and epistemological notions, proposing to change the terms, and thus the framework, of the debate.

For Larsen, modernism is intimately linked to a crisis of representation that affected all aspects of life in the late nineteenth century - a period when capitalism itself was undergoing transformation from its "classical" free market phase into a more abstract, monopolistic and imperialistic stage. Larsen finds the resultant loosening of ties between individuals and society - the breakdown of social and historical agency - behind the growth of modernism. He employs speculative cross-readings of key texts by Marx and Adorno, an examination of Manet's "The Execution of Maximilian," and an analysis of modernism in a Third World setting to explain why modernism made special claims upon the aesthetic, and how it ultimately ascribed historical agency to "works of art."

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