

**“RESPONSIBLE READING IS INHERENTLY
ETHICAL AND POLITICAL”***

“A leitura responsável é intrinsecamente ética e política”

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RESUMO

Podemos falar de um pós-pós-modernismo? É chegado o fim da teoria? O que é ler responsabilmente? Na presente entrevista, Stephen Ross, especialista em estudos sobre o Modernismo, responde a essas questões atento aos desafios da crítica contemporânea e à necessidade de posicionamentos de leitura éticos, generosos e politicamente conscientes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura pós-pós-modernista; teoria; leitura responsável.

ABSTRACT

Can we talk about a post-post-Modernism? Is it the end of theory? What is it to read responsibly? In this interview, Stephen Ross, a specialist in Modernist studies, answers to these questions with attention to the challenges of contemporary critics, and to the need for ethical, generous and politically-conscious reading stances.

KEYWORDS: post-post-Modernist literature; theory; responsible reading.

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Stephen Ross é professor na Universidade de Victoria (British Columbia, Canadá), onde leciona English and Cultural, Social, and Political Thought. Doutorou-se na Universidade de Kingston (Província de Ontário, Canadá), sendo sua publicação mais recente o livro *Post-War British Fiction and Youth Culture: From Teddy Boys to Trainspotting*, de 2018. Data desse ano o *The Handbook to the Bloomsbury Group*, que organizou e co-editou junto com Derek James Ryan. Em 2015, organizou e co-editou, em parceria com Allana C. Lindgren, *The Modernist World*. Desde 2016, coordena a publicação de *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. Antes dessas datas, foi responsável pela obra *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, de 2009. Em fase de produção, encontra-se o livro *Modernism, Theory and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation*, também sob sua organização.

* Entrevista realizada entre 15 e 22 de setembro de 2020.

A relação das obras organizadas, co-editadas e publicadas denotam o principal interesse de Stephen Ross: o Modernismo – ou, poder-se-ia dizer, a resistência da poética da modernidade, que se mantém viva nas primeiras décadas do século XXI. A esse tema, Stephen Ross agrega a questão do *Responsible reading*, que incide na tomada de posição por parte da crítica diante de seu objeto.

Na entrevista que se segue, realizada no mês de setembro de 2020, Stephen Ross expõe suas ideias a respeito, antecipando o teor do livro a ser lançado em 2021. Generoso ao compartilhar seu conhecimento e *expertise*, Stephen Ross tem toda a nossa gratidão, neste número da *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada* dedicado a refletir sobre os rumos da ciência que praticamos, no horizonte de uma possível pós-crítica.

INTERVIEW

RBLC: Modernism was a phenomenon of the first half of the 20th century. In the second half, movements introduced by the particle or prefix “post” rose: post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, etc. Can we speak of a post-post modernism?

Stephen Ross: I guess my initial response here is to say that what you are naming is canonical high modernism, the modernism of Paris, London, New York, Moscow, and Berlin. Modernism more broadly occurs along different timelines in different locales: showing up around mid-century in Canada, for example, experiencing a hiatus between an early onset up to 1919 and later resumption in the 1980s (interrupted by the Cultural Revolution), and so on. Likewise, modernism in cinema is associated with the *nouvelle vague* of the 1950s, and not the “classic” cinema of Fritz Lang, for example.

All that said, it is true that around mid-century the “post-” moniker does emerge to describe a sense of belatedness or supersession. The nature of that “post-” has long been disputed – does it mean simply “after” or is it a repudiation, a declaration of allegiance, a statement of genealogy, a continuation...? Post-modernism is, I think, highly specific: it refers to a set of aesthetic practices that pushed some of the ideas latent in modernist aesthetic to their logical extremes, while also abandoning the modernist concern with meaning or significance in the world. It emphasizes play and playfulness as an extension of the modernist realization that representational practices need not adhere to realist or verisimilar purposes. The results can be delightful and exhilarating, though ultimately, to my mind, they lack substance. Who reads *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* any longer, or *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, let alone *Gravity’s Rainbow*? The post-modernist experiment ran its course pretty fast, I think, and then collapsed under the weight of its own gimmicks.

What’s happened since is not exactly post-post-modernism except in the most chronological sense: what we see today (really since the 1990s) comes after post-modernism. There are several forms of the modernist (and, I suppose, post-modernist) legacy around now. On one hand, we have what some critics have called meta-modernism in the works of someone like W. G. Sebald: works that knowingly make use of modernist experimentalism to explore contemporary concerns. There’s also the ongoing hegemony of modernism (specifically Joyce and Woolf) in creative writing programmes, particularly in the USA: there, high modernism is still held up often as the pinnacle of artistic achievement, so many young people learn by emulating only to have to find a way themselves to be “post-” modernist

when they seek their own voice. Far and away, though, what dominates the literary landscape today is truly post-post-modernist in the sense of repudiation and erasure: neo-realism or what some call neo-Victorianism. This sort of writing simply pretends that modernism and post-modernism never occurred. It seeks transparent language and character or story-driven narratives rather than formal experimentation. Perhaps it's a sign of the times that writers don't feel we have the luxury to dally with formal oddities or experiments. Instead, and the mass readership seems to agree, the preponderance of work today comes under the sign of simply telling a really good story.

Personally, I find it a bit dismaying, since I like works that will challenge me as well as tell me a story (or maybe that will challenge me without telling me a story!). I've enjoyed James Kelman's *How Late it was, How Late* and John Burnside's *Glister in this vein*, but so often I'm simply disappointed by the lack of effort put into form these days. A good story is wonderful, don't get me wrong! But what's so bad about reading a book that leaves you perplexed, unsure, wondering? Can we really no longer enjoy works that confuse us and disorient us? Maybe not – maybe there's just too much of that in reality today. Or, maybe the modernists were simply built of hardier stuff: there was no shortage of disorientation and confusion in the first half of the twentieth century, and experiment flourished then.

RBLC: I agreed that “maybe the modernists were simply built of hardier stuff: there was no shortage of disorientation and confusion in the first half of the twentieth century, and experiment flourished then”. But this change, from the 20th century (first half, mainly) to the 21st century, is it not due to the facilities determined by the worldwide growth of the publishing market?

S.R.: This is a great question, and one that I was already sort of anticipating even when I wrote the first response. Of course, the view from here is that experiment is in decline or total abeyance, that modernism appears to have taught us nothing, etc. – despair! This is because the massive preponderance of work published today is non-experimental. But, of course, that was true in the 1920s as well; it's just that the experimental work that survived has an outsized reputation so that we think of modernism as dominating publishing in its time. That simply wasn't the case, just as the truly great work today is a tiny fragment of what is published globally. Now, as then, the works that are celebrated as the best are not necessarily those that will last, so it's very hard to make comparisons without being able to see into the future. I confess, as well, that I'm not as well versed in contemporary literature as I should be – *mea culpa!* That said, I do not see the same sorts of formal experiment taking place that made modernism so powerful. Even where there is experiment, say in bringing mystical elements into play with realist narratives as in the incredible work of Eden Robinson, there is little in the way of formal challenge. Perhaps this is fine. Perhaps this is like lamenting the fact that so few people write sonnets today! What it means for me, though, is a general impoverishment of literature that actually challenges its readers to work for the payoff. I like a book that leaves you guessing, questioning, wondering what just happened to you. The powerful work today seems to achieve its effects more by challenging beliefs, exposing marginalized or hidden traumas, or giving voice to hitherto silenced subjects. This is, of course, entirely as it should be – I do not want to give the impression that I object to lending an ear to these things. But, I do wonder if formal challenge might not help go even further in this line. With Gayatri Spivak, I have to ask whether such works don't ultimately lose their challenge, their edginess, when they come in the guise of neo-realism. Form is political, and specific forms have their limits.

I have to wonder whether the new realism doesn't lose sight of this fact, and give up the chance really to challenge readers in ways that are not so easily reducible to "story."

RBLC: Is there is a post-post-theory? Is it the end of the theory? Or the apocalypse of the theory?

S.R.: That all depends on what you mean by "theory", I suppose. I think of theory as broadly aligned against any philosophical inquiry for a transcendental truth. Rather than seek Truth (with the capital T), theory seeks to know the history of the quest for truth, to understand the impulse to find truth, and how what Foucault called "regimes of truth" have been established. It treats the human itself as a construct, and seeks to understand the conditions of possibility for that construct as well as the investments that give it consistency and coherence. In that sense, as long as thinkers continue to tackle questions of how and why certain thought-patterns function as true (or, at least, as necessary), theory is not over.

That said, what usually is meant by the term "post-structuralism" – the linguistic turn – is at an end, I think. Despite efforts to keep some form of radical constructivism alive in some quarters, it is no longer fashionable to claim that, for example, gender is purely performative or that there is no "outside-text." At the same time, eco-theory, post-humanism, critical race theory, and other vibrant fields still depend upon an analytics that explores first and foremost how their key terms have been constructed and shaped rhetorically over time: how has "nature" been produced as a category in modernity? How has the idea of the human itself been produced and what will come next if we allow it to self-deconstruct? How has "race" been naturalised and how can shifting the language towards that of racialization instead denaturalize it? Post-structuralism always claimed that it was concerned with the real material impacts of discursive structures, but far too often lapsed into self-indulgent language play. That excess is over now, I think, but the legacy of discursive analysis remains and powers the most compelling work in a broad array of fields still.

RBLC: What do you mean by "Responsible Reading"?

S.R.: It's very simple, really, and actually just comes down to being a good scholar, regardless of your field. The basic idea is that you must read generously, give the benefit of the doubt, quote and represent others' arguments kindly and accurately, and accord praise as well as blame. When you find a piece you admire, say so and tell the author. Don't read only to cherry-pick things you can criticize or that you can use to score points with. Be responsible in how you read others' work: respond to it rather than reacting only, and keep in mind that you have an ethical as well as a scholarly obligation to be correct. Being right, being accurate, being responsible: these things matter more than simply winning the fight or carrying the argument.

The concept emerged in a seminar discussion we had at the Modernist Studies Association conference in Toronto in 2019 (which seems a lifetime ago now!). The seminar was on weak theory, and participants had been instructed to read Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* as a starting point. I was concerned that the seminar session would simply be a series of objections to and criticisms of Felski, that it would turn into a post-critique bashing festival. I was struck, though, by how careful the participants were. To a one, even when they had criticisms or objections, they were scrupulous about quoting her fairly, giving credit to the parts of her argument that they felt were valid, and to honouring

the spirit of her book even when they took issue with its particulars. It ended up being a master-class in what we finally decided to call responsible reading.

In many ways, responsible reading is thus continuous with Felski’s notion of post-critique, since it wants to emphasize positivity and respect. At the same time, it rejects the call to move beyond critique, and still maintains that sometimes the only responsible reading is critical, suspicious, even paranoid. It would, for example, be irresponsible to read a politician’s speeches only for what they explicitly say, and not to read against their grain to understand the hidden or buried ideological commitments they may also be making. The very notion of something like “dog-whistle politics” requires us to read or listen attentively for that which lies just beneath the surface and which the speaker or author may actually be trying to sneak by an inattentive reader. Critique in this vein is essential, perhaps more now today than ever.

As this indicates, responsible reading is inherently ethical and political. Within the context of modernist studies, it calls on all of us to be answerable – to be response-ible – for the histories of racial, sexual, gendered, economic, ableist, and speciesist exclusions that make up modernism. Doing so means not only being historically conscious and sensitive in our scholarship, but attending to our own placement in the field, the institution, and the profession. It means listening to one another from a place of respect and openness. That might look like ceding space to those who have historically been marginalized, or it might look like claiming space for yourself to speak. It will certainly feel uncomfortable at times, and that’s fine – progress is rarely silk-lined. For myself, a white cis-hetero man with tenure at a Canadian university, it has meant learning to shut up, to insist on co-authorship with people whose voices are routinely ignored, and to try to create space for scholars who are not me – and whose ideas may even make me uncomfortable – to write, publish, and be listened to. And with that, perhaps it’s best that I follow my own advice and stop talking. Thank you for this great opportunity.

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