

HARVARD UNIVERSITY GSAS WORKSHOP TALKS

Linguistics Circle

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Location: Boylston Hall 105

Date: Friday, October 18, 2019

Time: 12:30-2pm

Title: "The Mental Life of Modernism"

Abstract: This talk is about modernism, the period in the arts ushered in at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. It focuses on the so-called sister arts: poetry, painting, and music. It does so because these art forms, like natural language, can be characterized from the point of view of shared rule systems.

The sister arts each underwent a sea change at virtually the same time. Music ceased to be tonally centered; meter was elbowed aside so that, as Robert Frost famously said, writing free verse resembled "playing tennis with the net down"; and painting came to reflect the material, the manner, and the artist rather than the subject matter.

Explanations for these changes have always been of a cultural sort. For example, the painter Paul Delaroche is said to have exclaimed upon seeing a daguerreotype, "Painting is dead." Cultural explanations, however, have not been able to generalize across the sister arts. Why should photography usher in free verse? Or atonality?

By looking at modernism from a linguistic point of view, namely, art as the product of shared rule systems, it is possible not only to produce a general explanation of what happened at the turn of the 20th century but also to identify modernism with the radical change in scientific thinking that occurred at the beginning of the 17th century. Both shifts are the same: the human mind coming up against its own limitations.