

Revisiting the divide: reading Modernism & Surrealism together

[Revisitando a divisão:
lendo o Modernismo e o Surrealismo em conjunto]

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Keywords

Modernisms, Modernity, Surrealism, Modern atmosphere, Virginia Woolf, André Breton.

Abstract

We do not inhabit a postmodern era. As Anthony Giddens has argued, the contemporary global world is more accurately understood as a phase in which the core dynamics of modernity have been intensified and universalized rather than superseded. Reading early 20th-century literature alongside modernity reveals its enduring impact on everyday life, skepticism toward science, and the construction of aesthetic identity amid societal transformations. Following New Modernist Studies and Air Studies, this paper examines Modernisms and Avant-gardes together to: (1) trace their separation and convergence, (2) develop a shared definition, and (3) explore the modern atmosphere in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Magnetic Fields* (1920). Atmosphere is a dynamic interplay of meteorological, social, and cultural forces that links Modernisms and Avant-gardes in responding to literary realism and engaging with modernity's empirical reality.

Palavras-chave

Modernismos, Modernidade, Surrealismo, Atmosfera moderna, Virginia Woolf, André Breton.

Resumo

Não vivemos numa era pós-moderna. Como argumentou Anthony Giddens, o mundo global contemporâneo é mais precisamente compreendido como uma fase em que a dinâmica central da modernidade foi intensificada e universalizada, em vez de superada. Ler a literatura do início do século XX em paralelo com a modernidade revela o seu impacto duradouro na vida quotidiana, o ceticismo em relação à ciência e a construção da identidade estética em meio às transformações sociais. Seguindo os Novos Estudos Modernistas e os Estudos da Atmosfera, este artigo examina Modernismos e Vanguardas em conjunto para: (1) traçar a sua separação e convergência, (2) desenvolver uma definição partilhada e (3) explorar a atmosfera moderna em *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), de Virginia Woolf, e em *The Magnetic Fields* (1920), de André Breton e Philippe Soupault. A atmosfera é uma interacção dinâmica de forças meteorológicas, sociais e culturais que liga Modernismos e Vanguardas na resposta ao realismo literário e no envolvimento com a realidade empírica da modernidade.

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A marvellous discovery indeed – that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life.

(WOOLF, 1992: 24; *Mrs. Dalloway*)

Modernity has become one of the central preoccupations of the humanities and social sciences in the 21st century, not only as a category demanding critical reassessment, but also as a framework for transdisciplinary inquiry and social engagement. Since its emergence in the 1990s, New Modernist Studies, even though the “Old” Modernist Studies were never explicitly defined, have likewise aimed to explore the relationship between modernist literature, broader processes of modernization, and the structures of modern life. Yet the relative lack of sustained critical reflection on the concept of Modernism within this field has often led to an overlap, and at times a conflation, between the categories of modernity and Modernism. This paper proposes a clear conceptual distinction between literary Modernism and modernity. Literary Modernism refers to an aesthetic framework that achieved prominence in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere at the turn of the 20th century. Modernity, by contrast, designates a historical condition originating in the 17th century, marked by the ascendancy of scientific reasoning over religious authority and everyday social practices. This condition was further shaped by the industrial, technological, and economic transformations of the 19th century, gradually establishing itself (albeit unevenly) as a framework structuring everyday life across Europe up to the present.

We do not inhabit a postmodern era¹. As Anthony Giddens and other scholars have argued, contemporary society is more accurately understood as a phase in which the core dynamics of modernity have been intensified and universalized rather than superseded (GIDDENS, 1990: 3). The present moment is thus marked not by rupture, but by the radicalization of modernity’s structural logic. It is therefore not incidental that we are witnessing a growing skepticism toward science, expressed in part through certain strands of the woke movement, alongside the resurgence of various forms of magical thinking and the consolidation of far-right political movements. The erosion of public trust in scientific authority, significantly exacerbated by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, has further complicated the status of scientific rationality in public discourse. In such a climate, literature and the arts may acquire renewed significance, offering alternative modes of meaning-making and reflection.

While the history of modernity continues to be the subject of critical analysis and can be traced at the intersection of multiple disciplines, the study of the theoretical category of literary Modernism has often been treated as self-evident. In their 2015 book, *Modernism. Evolution of an Idea*, Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers achieve something unprecedented in Modernist Studies: they undertake a novel and, at the

¹ On the declining explanatory force of postmodernism and postmodernity, see Amalia COTOI (2023).

same time, indispensable historical project, reconstructing the genealogy of the concept of Modernism from its origins in the 20th century's cultural and literary debates to the present. According to the authors, the reason Modernism today has become a concept deeply entrenched in academic discourse, yet largely stripped of explanatory power ("an ingrained yet somehow weightless concept") lies in the fact that, since the 1990, "the once dominant emphasis on Modernism as a purely aesthetic concept has been transformed by attempts to understand its imbrication in the social, material, and economic structures of a globally conceived modernity" (LATHAN & ROGERS, 2015: 2).

Throughout the 20th century in the Anglophone world, Modernism was frequently understood as "a cable" (LATHAN & ROGERS, 2015: 2) linking writers and critics through shared aesthetic practices. Yet the incorporation of the transdisciplinary concept of modernity into literary criticism—encompassing social, economic, historical, psychological, and technological transformations—has fundamentally reshaped the role of New Modernist Studies. As such, Modernism today is defined less by shared aesthetic orientations among writers than by its function as "a magnet" that draws a "modern body of experiences" into literary works (LATHAN & ROGERS, 2015: 12).

Within this line of thought, which aligns both with contemporary society's emphasis on the acceleration of experience and with current critical approaches to literature, modernist literature is frequently approached less as an aesthetic form than as a social document. It is understood as an *intervention* in social and cultural matters rather than merely a *representation* of inner life, losing its aesthetic aura. Nonetheless, as Fredric Jameson claims in *Inventions of a Present: The Novel in its Crisis of Globalization* (2024), it is important not to overlook that in the 20th century, particularly at its beginning, "each truly original and ambitious novel seeks formal judgment in its own right" (JAMESON, 2024: 1). In other words, if we disregard the ontological and artistic dimensions of aesthetics and conflate Modernism solely with modernity, literature risks being indistinguishable from other discourses on social change. Doing so would obscure or diminish the role of literary form in both engaging with broader societal concerns and shaping society.

Why separate the Avant-Gardes from Modernisms?

As this paper does not seek to diminish the significance of *formal judgment* in shaping both fictional worlds and empirical reality, it instead proposes reading Modernism and Surrealism together. Contemporary scholarship often interprets Modernism primarily through its social and cultural role within early 20th century modernity, a perspective that has brought it into close dialogue with the Avant-gardes (Surrealism included), which engaged with the modern establishment by challenging it and pushing artistic practices to their limits. Although this comparative approach is not

new and can already be found in major edited collections within New Modernist Studies (RABATÉ & SPIROPOULOU, 2021; BROOKER *et al.*, 2010), this paper foregrounds two underexplored aspects: (1) a metacritical perspective, that is, a reflection on the assumptions and conceptual frameworks that shape the study and interpretation of these movements; and (2) a case study demonstrating how the works of a representative of high Modernisms, such as Virginia Woolf, and a leading Surrealist figure, such as André Breton (along with Philippe Soupault), can be examined within the conceptual framework proposed by the conference that inspired this paper, namely the notion of *Plural Modernities* (*Modernidades Plurais*).²

Nowadays, literary scholarship often prioritizes analyses of genre over the macrostructures of literary movements in the study of contemporary literature. However, 20th century literature is frequently examined through the frameworks of Modernisms, the Avant-gardes, or Postmodernisms and, as previously noted, situated within the broader social parameters of modernity. This perspective constitutes the dominant framework within which Modernisms and the Avant-gardes are most commonly brought into dialogue today, often conceptualized as existing in a symbiotic relationship. However, in early 20th century Europe, these movements represented distinct responses both to the literary tradition and to the broader historical and cultural conditions of modernity.

Rather than adopting either a purely aesthetic approach or one dominated by the modern condition, wherein modernist literature is reduced to a mere social document, I propose establishing a dialectical framework, as theorized by the Frankfurt School and in line with the approach adopted by Jean-Michel RABATÉ and Angeliki SPIROPOULOU, the editors of *Historical Modernisms: Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics* (2021). As such, we examine the processes of cultural construction and the dynamic relationship between Modernisms and Avant-gardes by means of two complementary methods. First, by drawing on the notion of *formal judgment* implied in Fredric Jameson's work and referenced earlier in this study, since neither Modernism, nor Surrealism can be fully understood without acknowledging the structural and hence metacritic consciousness that shaped their compositional processes. Second, from the perspective of negative referentiality, since both Modernism and the Avant-gardes can be seen as perpetuating the literary tradition precisely through the negation of certain elements of historical referentiality or established fictional norms, thereby redefining the potentialities of fictional form.

However, despite their departure from conventional mimetic standards, these movements remained embedded within historical frameworks, emerging within the context of unprecedented processes of modernization and articulating a

² The conference I am referring to was organized by Rui Sousa as a representative of CLEPUL and the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa. It was titled *Modernidades Plurais. Modernismo e Surrealismo na Literatura e nas Artes* and took place in Lisbon from June 4 to 7, 2024.

series of complex negotiations with modernity. In this sense, they may also be understood as participating in the ecologies of modern atmosphere: that is, in the dynamic and interrelated systems—social, technological, affective, and perceptual—that produce the distinctive experiential climate of modern life. Rather than merely reflecting modernity, these movements register, mediate, and reconfigure the diffuse intensities, temporal dislocations, and sensory conditions generated within these atmospheric ecologies, thereby rendering perceptible the otherwise elusive structures of modern experience.

In other words, both the experimental inward turn of Modernism and the more radical Avant-garde gestures of rupture with the literary establishment—aimed at transforming not only literary forms but also social structures—can be understood as responses to the accelerated modernization of the early 20th century. The expansion of transportation networks, the growth of the travel industry, and the acceleration of long-distance communication before and after the First World War—facilitated by infrastructural development and advances in telecommunications—profoundly reshaped cultural experience and had a decisive impact on literary and artistic forms. This interaction shaped both high modernist culture and literature, as canonized by 20th century criticism, and Avant-garde practices, which often aimed to engage broader audiences. In this paper, the modern atmosphere is examined through an analysis of two literary texts from the interwar period: one widely recognized as modernist and the other as surrealist.

Even when Modernism and Surrealism are brought together under the conceptual framework of *plural modernities*, a fundamental question remains: why were they critically separated in the first place? This question does not concern the movements themselves alone, because while Modernism was often associated with the ethos of “make it new”, Avant-gardes strongly rejected both artistic tradition and the establishment. Rather, the issue pertains to critical discourse: what conditions made it necessary to undertake a materialist turn in literary criticism in order to render Modernism and the Avant-gardes thinkable and interpretable within a shared analytical framework?

I seek to address this question by drawing on an observation made by the authors of the already mentioned book, *Modernism. Evolution of an Idea*. The Modernist Studies Association (MSA) was founded by scholars from the United States, Canada, and England, and functions entirely in English. By contrast, its European equivalent, the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernist Studies, operates in English, French, and German (LATHAN & ROGERS, 2015: 5). Why is this the case? The term Modernism was coined and has been primarily used within the Anglophone scholarly tradition to designate literary production from the late 19th century to the onset of the Second World War. In the French context, for example, Modernism does not operate as a distinct critical category, although efforts to establish it as such have been made in recent years. While Marcel Proust may be classified

as a modernist within Anglophone criticism, in France he is not typically subsumed under this category, but is instead approached primarily as an individual author. In place of the concept of Modernism, much of continental Europe has historically privileged the category of the Avant-gardes, a distinction that has often been neglected in American scholarship. Consequently, given that many influential theories of Modernism have been formulated within English Studies, whereas French criticism developed a robust theoretical framework for the Avant-gardes that circulated across Europe (and was later transmitted to the United States), it is perhaps less surprising that Modernism and the Avant-gardes were not systematically considered within a unified critical framework for much of the 20th century.

A question that emerges, in connection with the two issues raised at the outset, concerns whether the definition of Modernism changes when it is considered in relation to the Avant-gardes, particularly in light of their interconnectedness through: a. *modern body of experiences*, b. *formal judgment*, and c. *negative referentiality*.

What about a working definition of Modernisms and the Avant-Gardes?

Two key thinkers inform the development of my working definition of Modernism and the Avant-gardes (Surrealism included). The first is Thierry de Duve, professor of modern and contemporary art theory, known for his seminal work in the field of visual arts: *Kant after Duchamp* (1993). The second is the philosopher Peter Osborne, whose influential book on contemporary art *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013) offers a broad, interdisciplinary framework.

Thierry de Duve argues that “art in general” would not have been possible without the historical intervention of the Avant-gardes (DE DUVE, 1996: 73). According to this perspective, the Avant-gardes fundamentally redefine the concept of art, challenging the modern imperative of medium-specific artistic practice, such as painting, writing, or sculpture. Instead, one may simply be recognized as an artist, regardless of medium. In other words, the Avant-gardes oppose both a defining feature of modernity, namely specialization, and a tradition that de Duve describes in terms of a “genealogy through which the name ‘art’ was transmitted” (DE DUVE, 1996: 73). However, de Duve maintains that this apparent rejection of tradition is, paradoxically, also its continuation. The formulation “art as non-art and non-art as art” (DE DUVE, 1996: 73) ultimately remains within the category of art itself, thereby reaffirming rather than contesting the establishment.

For an art historian such as de Duve, the Avant-gardes provide the definition of art, whereas for Peter Osborne it is Modernism that underlies contemporary literature and culture, as well as the forms of mediation through which we operate in historical periodization. As Peter Osborne argues, *aesthetic identity* doesn’t begin with classicism or romanticism, but with “aesthetic modernism”, which is subsequently developed into an “-ism” through the formation of groups organized

around shared principles. This model of periodization, which Osborne designates as the “modernism of avant-gardes”, does not extend into Postmodernism, contrary to the claims of Anglophone literary historiography. Rather than culminating in Postmodernism, this model develops into two distinct forms of modernism — “formalist modernism” and “generic modernism” —, which do not end with the 20th century, but continue to operate historically. As such, within an era defined by hybridity and by a contemporary condition that integrates multiple temporalities, contemporary art, “generic modernism 2”, and the “dialectic of modernism” may be regarded as conceptually convergent (OSBORNE, 2013: 96).

Two aspects are noteworthy in relation to Osborne’s analysis. First, he conceptualizes Modernism as a plurality of succeeding periodization categories, among which the “modernism of the avant-gardes” occupies a central position. Second, he approaches art primarily through the category of form, understood in Marxist terms as a kind of social thermometer, since form constitutes “the artistic mediation of the social at a whole range of levels, from artistic materials (including technologies of production) to techniques and productive practices” (OSBORNE, 2013: 95). While content is collective in nature, form represents the means through which a work of art articulates its “ontological individuality” (OSBORNE, 2013: 95). Both the Avant-gardes and Modernism were among the first movements to become self-conscious of the mediating power of form. Accordingly, Osborne argues that, when interpreting contemporary literature through this formal lens, Modernism cannot be disregarded.

Furthermore, one significant aspect of Osborne’s typology of Modernisms is his description of the transition from *aesthetic modernism* to *generic modernism* as an evolutionary process. This development entails a shift from *aesthetic modernism* to *artistic modernism*, a transformation catalyzed by Duchamp (as in Thierry de Duve’s account), and characterized by the “abandonment of craft” (OSBORNE, 2013: 92), which means foregrounding the idea and context of the work over technical skills and traditional craftsmanship. According to Osborne, the abandonment “became the basis of an alternative modernist tradition (an alternative to both general-aesthetic and medium-specific modernisms): the modernism of a generic concept of art, or what we might call a «generic artistic modernism»” (OSBORNE, 2013: 92). For this reason, Modernism is defined by its capacity to claim the name “art” in a new manner (OSBORNE, 2013: 96), a formulation that offers a compelling shared definition of both Modernism and the Avant-gardes, and brings together the three common features of the two, developed in relation to modernity and already mentioned in the first part: (a) a modern body of experiences, (b) formal consciousness, and (c) negative referentiality.

Do the Surrealism and Modernism share a common atmosphere?

Building on a working definition of Modernism and the Avant-gardes situated at the intersection of philosophy, the visual arts, and critical and cultural theory, within the methodological framework of the ecocritical cluster known as Air Studies, this section investigates the ecologies of modern atmosphere, namely the complex, inter-dependent systems (social, technological, material, and perceptual) that produce the distinctive climates of feeling, perception, and experience characteristic of modernity. These ecologies include both the material qualities of air and urban spaces and the affective and cultural atmospheres that circulate through literature and daily life, guiding how individuals' sense, interpret, and respond to the world.

In *The Pattern of the Atmosphere Story* (1923), an image by Thomas Uzell intended to illustrate narrative composition, the author reveals how narrative atmosphere develops through the dynamic interaction of characters' individual affects (UZELL, 1934: 373). In this representation, emotions are depicted as forces that raise and lower a line traversing the surrounding space, thereby modulating it and generating the affective texture of writing. The image thus advances the proposition that the emotional conditions in the air are inscribed within the narratives of a given historical moment. However, the concept of atmosphere, whether applied to the present or to the modernity of a century ago, admits multiple, overlapping meanings. First, it may be understood in a social sense, as represented in the image: the lived experience of individual and collective emotional states, which today is conceptualized in terms of a specific mood (BÖHME, 2017: 2). Second, atmosphere can be construed meteorologically, referring to climatic and weather-related phenomena through which environmental conditions are articulated. Third, it assumes a literary dimension, designating the affective effect a text produces in the reader, especially within post-critical, ethical, and participatory modes of reading. Finally, atmosphere may be conceived in cultural terms, akin to *Zeitgeist*, as an intangible yet pervasive force shaping historical experience.

When Virginia Woolf, one of the most well-known representatives of Modernism today, began writing *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1922, she was, as Michael North notes, strongly influenced by what the *Daily Mail* called "the greatest single development in outdoor advertising" (NORTH, 1999: 81). As such, the narrative captures the effect of the first aerial advertising displays on the crowd gathered near Buckingham Palace, as follows:

Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up.

Dropping dead down the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose, and whatever it did, wherever it went, out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps?

(WOOLF, 1992: 21-22)

The message displayed in the sky, which the onlookers in the park appear initially unable to decipher, proves to be nothing other than an advertisement for a newspaper, specifically the *Daily Mail*. According to Michael North, *The Daily Mail* produces what may be considered the first instance of aerial advertising, thereby demonstrating the blurring of the boundary between news and advertising (NORTH, 1999: 83). This blurring is effected by presenting the aerial display itself as an advertisement for a newspaper. The rival publication, *Illustrated London News* (ILN), extends this logic of simulacrum even further: its report on the spectacle staged by the *Daily Mail* is accompanied by an illustration depicting the sky above Palace of Westminster inscribed not with “Daily Mail”, but with “ILN” (NORTH, 1999: 81-82). In this way, ILN appropriates the very space of reportage to counteract the promotional effect generated for its competitor through ostensibly objective coverage, exploiting the more immediate and compelling visual impact of the image in contrast to written text.

The crowd’s inability to decipher the letters traced by the airplane in the sky does not indicate a failure of perception; indeed, the favorable weather conditions and high visibility would have made such an event otherwise impossible. Rather, this general confusion depicts the *unconscious* and the irrationality of public opinion in the aftermath of World War I (NORTH, 1999: 85). Against the backdrop of an expanding media landscape and increasingly rapid modes of information transmission, the voices of the collective and the individual both diverge and, almost simultaneously, converge. Furthermore, the public and private, as fundamental dimensions of existence, along with the boundaries separating nature and culture, and even those structured through regimes of visibility, such as the distinction between sky and earth, are shown to destabilize, alternately separating and collapsing into one another. This process does not result in a failure of perception so much as in a pervasive sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an accelerated modernity. If the characters of Virginia Woolf are depicted rubbing their eyes in an effort to comprehend both what is unfolding in the world and what is happening to them, this gesture can be read as resonating with today’s responses to global urgencies and to the dissolution of distinctions between empirical reality and simulacrum in the context of the rise of artificial intelligence.

Atmosphere not only mediates between sky and earth, and between the natural, living world and the cultural, as emphasized by Gernot Böhme in *The Aesthetic of Atmosphere* (2016), but also exposes the contingency of these distinctions. Objects,

humans, plants, and animals appear simultaneously interconnected and in motion, forming a solidarity among disparate and dispersed elements. On one hand, these elements constitute the materiality, structure, and composition of the atmosphere; on the other hand, they imply an atmosphere that is not merely receptive to affects but possesses its own agency, exerting influence as well as being influenced, as seen in the following example:

“K . . . R . . .” said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say “Kay Arr” close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed – that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses’ heads, feathers on ladies’, so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more

(WOOLF, 1992: 23-24)

Who or what exercises agency in this passage: Septimius, Rezia, the narrator, the elm tree, or all of them collectively? I would argue that agency operates first at the level of each individual entity and, subsequently, through their combined interaction via the agency of the air. It is the air that connects these elements, producing the impression of materiality: it animates the human voice, which “can quicken trees into life” under certain atmospheric conditions; it shapes the perceived weight of Rezia’s hand; and it structures the plasticity of the elm trees. The presence of the elm trees is deliberate rather than incidental: they not only participate in the aerial scene but also provide a specific historical and cultural context. During the Great Exhibition of 1851, for example, Londoners built the Crystal Palace (a modern glass-and-metal structure) around one of the two Victorian elms in Royal Park, demonstrating how these trees contributed both materially and symbolically to the event.

As represented in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the elm tree functions first to generate a cultural atmosphere: it embodies a historical presence within the British cultural landscape, rooted in a longstanding tradition. Beyond this, it contributes to the formation of mood, both through its perceptive qualities (color, light) and by evoking specific emotional states. This is exemplified when doctor Holmes suggests to Septimius’s wife that, if he “were to take an interest in things outside of himself”, “the agitation” of the elms “would drive him mad”, illustrating not only how the presence of the trees mediates both affective and social experience, but also how scientific authority dominated interpretations of nature in public discourse a century ago.

Mrs. Dalloway was published in 1925, while *The Magnetic Fields* (*Les Champs Magnétiques*), written by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, often considered the

inaugural text of literary Surrealism, predates it, appearing five years before the first *Surrealist Manifesto*. Six years after its publication (1920), Philippe Soupault was excluded from the surrealist circle, as he was deemed “too literary” (BRETON, 2020: 2) due to his departure from automatic writing (a central surrealist practice) in favor of more carefully crafted compositions. Produced through a combination of automatic writing and the exquisite corpse method, in which writers sequentially add words or images to a text or image, *The Magnetic Fields* exemplifies undoubtedly a quintessential surrealist work. The authors completed their contributions daily, finishing at the end of a chapter and resuming where they had left off the following morning.

On a macro level, the resulting text aligns with my definitions of both Modernism and the Avant-gardes: it asserts itself as art in a novel form, invites formal evaluation, and departs from the mimetic conventions of the 19th century realism. On a micro level, an examination of textual fragments—arguably the most practical method for approaching this work—reveals a focus, similar to *Mrs. Dalloway*, on the *modern body of experiences*. The text references various modern objects, such as Eau de Botot mouthwash and the electroscope, which measures electric charge in the body, while also evoking the modern atmosphere, interpreted in both meteorological and social terms.

At first, the air appears as a positive force, stronger than walls, leading the narrator to ask: “So what is this great power more terrible than air?” (BRETON, 2020: 10). As the narrative progresses, however, the air gradually becomes problematic, as seen in the passage below:

He is far away, the one who knows how to return that leaping cheerfulness to us. He lets the dusty days flow by and he no longer listens to what we say. “Have you forgotten our voices wrapped in affections and our remarkable gestures? Do the animals from free countries and abandoned seas no longer torment you? I can still see those struggles and those red outrages that strangled us. My dear friend, why do you want to say nothing more about your waterproof memories?” The air with which only yesterday we were filling our lungs is becoming unbreathable.

(BRETON, 2020: 11)

It is difficult to determine precisely why the air becomes “unbreathable” at this point in the narrative, given that the text takes the form of fragmented diary entries; nevertheless, multiple interpretations remain plausible. Since it was published in 1920, the text may have been written in the aftermath of the First World War, during a period of profound modernization in France and across Europe, which may contribute to the sense of atmospheric tension. The subsequent recurrence of the air, however, emphasizes its social dimension: the “musky air of everywhere” is paired with

the “sound of bells”, evoking a collective response of both weariness and fear (BRETON, 2020: 13). As such, the atmosphere reflects not only the physical environment but also the psychological and social states of humanity in a rapidly changing world.

Nevertheless, I believe that the passage reproduced below provides the clearest articulation of the peril present in the air and its underlying cause:

Out at sea pass silent plumes of smoke and suspicious balls. Pitiless the loving swaying of waterspouts seizes the little lakes with admiration and dirigibles move above armies. These kings of the air adopt a necessary constitution of fogs, and grandstands open up in front of the yellow archbishop who has the rainbow for a cross and a mitre of sunny rain.

(BRETON, 2020: 24)

I speculate that this imagery relates to the aftermath of the First World War and, more specifically, to the so-called Red Zones (*Zones Rouges*) in France: regions so extensively devastated and contaminated by warfare that even over a century later they remain largely uninhabitable and unsuitable for agriculture. During the inter-war period, infrastructure across the country was severely disrupted: roads, bridges, canals, and railways were destroyed, while entire cities were reduced to rubble. This historical context amplifies the sense of desolation conveyed in the text. The final quotation reinforces this interpretation, describing “plumes of smoke and suspicious balls” drifting through the sky “above armies”, thereby constructing a complex atmosphere that is simultaneously social, cultural, and meteorological. The passage evokes both the material and psychological consequences of war, intertwining environmental devastation with collective human experience and, as in *Mrs Dalloway*, contributing to ecologies of modern atmosphere. Whereas in *Mrs Dalloway* the formation of atmosphere, and of the narrative itself, is occasioned by the first aerial advertisement and the confusion it provokes, in Breton’s and Soupault’s *The Magnetic Fields* the affective texture of the fiction arises from the direct impacts of warfare and its aftermath.

Overall, my aim has been to demonstrate that constructing an ecology of modern atmosphere requires attention to both the macro- and micro-levels of critical reading. The macro-level approach entails a theoretical framework, proposing a working definition of Modernism and Surrealism, as well as the Avant-gardes more broadly. In contrast, the micro-level reading employs the lens of Air Studies, examining the textual and atmospheric elements that convey these artistic concerns.

Through this dual approach, I have sought to demonstrate two key points: (1) **The construction of atmosphere in literature.** Among the arts, literature is uniquely capable of producing a nuanced sense of atmosphere, which emerges at the intersection of aesthetic form and social context. Literary form provides the structure

through which atmosphere is articulated, while the surrounding social, historical, and cultural conditions furnish the contextual framework that gives the atmosphere its meaning and resonance. (2) **The unifying role of atmosphere in Modernism and Surrealism** lies in its function as a conceptual bridge between these periodization categories, enabling new ways of understanding and claiming what art can do. This operates across three interrelated dimensions: (a) the evocation of a *modern body of experiences*, including aerial advertising, warfare, and its aftermath; (b) an awareness of form as an integral part of artistic creation; and (c) the negative referentiality these experiences imply. Both Modernism and Surrealism increasingly treat atmosphere as a central aesthetic and experiential category. The prominence of atmospheric representation in the second decade of the 20th century is closely tied to the material developments of modernity: innovations such as air travel and radio, along with the environmental and social consequences of industrialization and the First World War, shaped not only the literary imagination but also the experience of the modern atmosphere and public perception. This collective imaginary is documented and explored across modernist, surrealist, and avant-garde works, revealing the shared ways in which these movements respond to, and construct, their aesthetic identity in relation to a rapidly changing world.

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