



Paradoxy of Modernism

Robert Scholes

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In this lively, personal book, Robert Scholes intervenes in ongoing discussions about modernism in the arts during the crucial half-century from 1895 to 1945. While critics of and apologists for modernism have defined modern art and literature in terms of binary oppositions—high/low, old/new, hard/soft, poetry/rhetoric—Scholes contends that these distinctions are in fact confused and misleading. Such oppositions are instances of “paradox”—an apparent clarity that covers real confusion.

Closely examining specific literary texts, drawings, critical writings, and memoirs, Scholes seeks to complicate the neat polar oppositions attributed to modernism. He argues for the rehabilitation of works in the middle ground that have been trivialized in previous evaluations, and he fights orthodoxy with such paradoxes as “durable fluff,” “formulaic creativity,” and “iridescent mediocrity.” The book reconsiders major figures like James Joyce while underscoring the value of minor figures and addressing new attention to others rarely studied. It includes twenty-two illustrations of the artworks discussed. Filled with the observations of a personable and witty guide, this is a book that opens up for a reader’s delight the rich cultural terrain of modernism.

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