Book Review: Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film (Andreas Huyssen)

Ben Streeter, George Washington University

Modernism comes in many forms. Modernists generally agree that the time period referred to as ‘modernism’ includes the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, but its start and finish has been debated. Some say early modernism, or romanticism, stretches far back into the nineteenth century. Others see modernism reaching well past the interwar years to post-World War Two, and into postmodernism. For Andreas Huyssen, Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, the metropolitan miniature, his term for the short modernist texts often found in feuilletons, belongs to a time period beginning with Charles Baudelaire in the second half of the nineteenth century and ending with Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, written in the 1940s and published in German in 1951. In between, practitioners of these highly visual, highly condensed, and very short texts include Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, Walter Benn and Robert Musil. These texts are analysed closely by Huyssen in this book.

Though modernism’s timetable is in flux, many scholars agree on modernism’s intertwine with the metropolis. For this reason, perhaps, no writer more than Franz Kafka epitomises the period of literature during which individuals were overwhelmed by urbanity and all it was associated with: machines, a faster pace of life, the anonymity of crowds, new technologies of entertainment, the phonograph, and the moving picture. Kafka brings the miniature into the twentieth century, according to Huyssen. With Kafka, the individual subject becomes the object of the metropolis: in his writing, we face ‘figures of a statistical average, men and women of an urban crowd, voided and nameless subjects’ [1]. The anonymous way of looking in Kafka is linked by Huyssen to new developments in technology, specifically the scientific, objective gaze of the photographer. Kafka juxtaposes stillness and movement in a way that ‘neither film nor photography (in contrast to literature) could ever achieve alone’ [2].

The metropolitan miniature is a form of literature that takes developments in photography and film and reintegrates them into the literary realm, a process that Huyssen calls ‘remediation in reverse’ [3]. The turn of the century is marked by widespread remediation, and this cross-pollination, writes Huyssen, gives rise to the miniature. What photography does that is new is to allow viewers to perceive smaller scales than ever before, granting viewers a kind of microscopic way of seeing. And film allows audiences to see movement, such as the urban shuffle of pedestrians on sidewalks, for the first time. But what only metropolitan miniatures do, Huyssen says, is to combine these two new ways of looking into highly condensed and imagistic literary creations. They are characterised by compression and associated with critical readings of the modern metropolis, especially those of Walter Benjamin (Berlin, Paris, Marseille) and Theodor Adorno (Los Angeles). One of the few genuinely novel modes of writing inaugurated by modernism is the miniature, writes Huyssen. The miniature begins its historical trajectory with Charles Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* in 1857 and ends with Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, in which Huyssen finds Adorno’s writing strategy an apt descriptor of the miniature: ‘Properly written texts are like spiders’ webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm’ [4]. Adorno’s texts manifest the present absence of Los Angeles, a claim Huyssen makes by pointing to passages such as this one, which does not mention the city explicitly: ‘The haste, nervousness, restlessness observed since the rise of the big cities is now spreading in the manner of an epidemic, as did once the plague and cholera’ [5]. By the time of Adorno’s writing of Los
Angeles, modernisation had spread out of the metropolis via consumerism and media penetration. The metropolitan miniature had come to an end, Huyssen says, its condition of possibility having ceased to exist [6].

Huyssen goes about defining the miniature via a series of contrasts. Unlike the modern epic, he says, the miniature never aims at a utopian scale [7]. Unlike forms of high modernism, the miniature is decidedly popular, distributed through mass-circulated newspaper feuilletons. Breaking away from the ‘mimetic strategies’ of realism, the miniature does not contain ‘ekphrastic descriptions of urban scenes’ [8]. He also cites the work of Ernst Jünger to serve as a foil for miniatures. Huyssen argues that Jünger’s texts lack the self-reflexivity and shifts in perspective that characterise the work of Kafka and other miniaturists; they also lack literary remediation in reverse [9]. Their lack of substantial negotiation between print and visual media, combined with what Huyssen calls Jünger’s ‘derivative black romanticism’, places Jünger’s short texts closer to pre-modernism [10].

The front cover of Benjamin’s 1928 collection of miniatures One-Way Street (Einbahnstrasse) shows pedestrians and storefronts with one-way road signs (‘Einbahnstrasse’) pointing out of the frame to the right. A public bus on the back cover reinforces the direction of the signs. In his discussion of the cover, Huyssen emphasises that its traffic sign ‘points to writing, script, and letters in urban space’ [11]. The signs create a perception of depth that points to the ‘plunging depth of critical reflections’ in the miniatures [12]. Against the one-way directionality indicated by the signs on the front cover, the texts display a cinematic ‘elliptical structure’ focusing in part on ‘script in the modern metropolis’ [13]. While Benjamin’s text is devoid of photographs, it is ‘chock-full of wonderful literary images’ [14]. For example, in ‘Stamp Shop’, Benjamin writes about the emblematic combination of image and text on the stamp, itself a miniature. Here is Benjamin: ‘Stamps bristle with tiny numbers, minute letters, diminutive leaves and eyes’ [15].
For Huyssen, Benjamin was deliberately using imagistic style in his writing, evidenced by Benjamin’s assertion that images in the mind can ‘vitalize the will’ in a way that mere words cannot, adding ‘there is no intact will without pictorial imagination’ [16].

Miniature Metropolis is an important contribution to modernist studies, and may help to bring attention to an overlooked form — the condensed, visual, literary miniature — which brings together modern philosophical developments associated with critical theorists such as Benjamin and Adorno and remediation between literature and emerging visual forms such as film and photography, circulated to the metropolitan masses in the form of the feuilleton newspaper in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Ben Streeter is a graduate student at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. His writing has appeared in the journal World Literature Today. He has written for ASAP/J, Public Books, and the Honest Ulsterman.


[2] ibid., p. 70
[3] ibid., p. 8
[4] ibid., p. 271
[5] ibid., p. 277
[6] ibid., p. 296
[7] ibid., p. 18
[8] ibid., p. 275
[9] ibid., p. 219
[10] ibid., p. 228
[12] ibid., p. 153
[13] ibid., p. 149
[14] ibid., p. 148
[16] ibid., p. 466

Articles, Reviews