

The New Criterion

Features

November 2007

Modernism then & now

by [John Gross](#)

On Peter Gay's *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*.

Modernism is one of those key terms which everyone uses in talking about the arts, but which most of us would prefer not to have to define. It can mean so many different things in different contexts; far from embodying a unified set of doctrines, it represents an unsystematic and complicated skein of affinities between individual artists—a vast tangle of partial links and piecemeal influences.

If anything, its meaning is even harder to pin down than those of such comparably wide-ranging concepts as realism or romanticism, since unlike them it assigns a primary role to the idea of progress. That, after all, is where the use of “modernism” as a label puts the emphasis—not on a particular set of aesthetic or intellectual values, but on the virtue of change itself, and the desirability of moving ahead. “Behold, I make all things new.” But nothing stays modern forever, and what happens to such a movement ...

John Gross's most recent book is *A Double Thread: Growing Up English and Jewish in London* (Ivan R Dee).

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 26 November 2007, on page 30

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