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7. Modernism and the Middlebrow

Faye Hammill

“Really, we've about exhausted the opportunities for self-improvement or even entertainment in Eden. I'm frightfully bored, and there's absolutely nothing to do after dinner.”¹ So complains Eve in one of the fictional scenarios that *Vanity Fair* used as advertisements for itself in the 1920s. Fortunately, her ennui is soon relieved by a year's subscription to the magazine. What *Vanity Fair* offered was, precisely, a combination of self-improvement and entertainment. And that was what the culture of the middlebrow was all about.

Or, at any rate, that is the way cultural historians would most often define the middlebrow: as a set of institutions and practices oriented towards the education of taste. The institutions of middlebrow culture in early to mid-twentieth-century America included book clubs, literary societies, educational broadcasting, digests, self-help publishing, smart magazines, reprint series, and university extension courses. Accompanying audience practices included social and shared reading, non-scholarly and emotionally involved reading, and the instrumental use of art, music or books to achieve upward mobility.

This definition of 'middlebrow' competes, however, with another one. Some critics invoke the term to describe an intermediate range of cultural production – between the highbrow (formally innovative, intellectually challenging) and the lowbrow (formulaic, commercial). Thus, particular artists or artworks – whether films, compositions, novels or pictures – are designated as 'middlebrow'. Whilst that can sometimes be a useful method of categorisation, it can also be risky. Judgements about brow levels can shift markedly over time. A book might be initially received as a contribution to high art, only to be dismissed as trash by later generations (Edna Ferber's *So Big* [1924]); equally, work produced expressly for profit can be gradually canonised (Scott Fitzgerald's short stories).

To complicate things further, this second usage of 'middlebrow' can be either celebratory or derogatory. Academic critics often use the word to describe works that reached wide audiences in the earlier twentieth century but are now unjustly neglected because they are accessible and not experimental in style. On the other hand, when the term is used in the media, it implies that a particular novel or film is unchallenging, conventional and mediocre, yet with pretensions to be taken seriously.

So, the two main debates around this term are these. First, is 'middlebrow' an aesthetic property of artworks or a set of cultural formations that circulate and interpret those artworks to broad audiences? Second, is the culture of the middlebrow a good thing because it improves literacy and public taste, or a bad thing because it has a standardising effect and tends to devalue intellectual culture and high art? The first debate is conducted principally among scholars in our own era, while the second has its origins in the interwar period, and is regularly re-ignited.

What does all this have to do with modernism? The most important answer is that institutions and tastemakers associated with the middlebrow created new audiences for modernist works. In terms of literature, many of the authors who now form the modernist canon frequently published their work in mainstream print venues, whether in order to make money, to reach new constituencies of readers, or to enhance their celebrity images. Even if an author chose to publish only in little magazines or small-circulation book editions, their texts were often republished (or pirated) in a reprint magazine, as a volume in a uniform book series, or even as a mass-market paperback.² In this way, the texts move – in Pierre Bourdieu's terms – from the “field of restricted production” to that of “large-scale production.”³ On another level, the pedagogical function of the middlebrow involved re-presenting and interpreting difficult works so that they became more accessible to the general public. A variety of means were used, including reviews and talks (printed, broadcast, or live), book clubs, magazines, exhibitions and adult education.⁴

Yet middlebrow institutions not only disseminated modernism – they also critiqued it. John Guillory writes: “Middlebrow culture is the ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural.”⁵ His word 'ambivalent' is crucial. The ideology of the middlebrow was at least partly forged in opposition to the perceived elitism or unintelligibility of modernism. *Vanity Fair* published experimental poems and reproductions of abstract paintings, but it also parodied and mocked them. Its attitude exhibits the characteristic doubleness of the middlebrow: on the one hand, its editorial voice was detached, ironic, and often sceptical; on the other, it engaged boldly with the innovations and fashions of the contemporary cultural scene. Similarly, middlebrow modes of cultural consumption could function as implicit critiques of modernist practice. For example, book clubs often promoted ways of reading that prioritised affective response over attention to formal features. In this way, they resisted the emphasis placed by academic critics (especially those who became associated with New Criticism) on literary discourse as a specialised kind of communication, that should be analysed through close attention to its linguistic features. As Janice Radway observes, “despite the traditional claim that middlebrow culture simply apes the values of high culture, it is in fact a kind of counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic English departments for the last fifty years or so.”⁶ Middlebrow culture, then, was both a conduit for modernism and a riposte to it.

Theories of the American middlebrow

The middlebrow is an international phenomenon. Recent work explores its instantiations in, for example, France, Australia, the Netherlands and Canada,⁷ building on a large body of existing research on the British and US contexts. However, the nuances are different in each country, not least because discourses of improvement were often co-opted into projects of national self-

definition. In Anglophone countries, the term 'middlebrow' began to circulate in the 1920s, although 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' have a longer history. Van Wyck Brooks includes a chapter titled "'Highbrow' and 'Lowbrow'" in *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915), writing of his country's "frank acceptance of twin values which are not expected to have anything in common" – on the one hand, "high ideals," and on the other, "catchpenny realities." The highbrow, he suggests, is seen as "superior" but "inept," while the lowbrow is "a good fellow one readily takes to, but with a certain scorn for him and all his works."⁸ Brooks laments the absence of a "genial middle ground" – that is, a synthesis of cultured idealism with a more economically-grounded or pragmatic stance. Yet some later commentators argue that this terrain, which is precisely that of the middlebrow, was in fact clearly identifiable in the nineteenth century. In *The Tastemakers* (1954), Russell Lynes, magazine editor and pioneer of the sociology of culture, presents a history of American taste from the 1820s to the 1950s. Over this period, increasingly, "Taste became everybody's business and not just the business of the cultured few."⁹ This was not simply a process of democratisation – Lynes's word 'business' points to the pivotal role of consumer capitalism.

In the chapter 'Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow' (originally published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1949), Lynes asserts that in America, prestige is no longer determined simply by family and wealth, but principally by tastes, as expressed through material objects and social or professional activities. He suggests that the highbrow is "primarily a critic and not an artist – a taster, not a cook," while middlebrows are "natural gamblers in the commodities of culture" and the lowbrow simply "wants to be comfortable and to enjoy himself." Crucially, while the lowbrow "knows what he likes, and he doesn't care why he likes it," the middlebrow "is unsure about almost everything, especially about what he likes."¹⁰ For Lynes, then, the middlebrow mind-set is characterised, not so much by the possession of particular tastes, but by anxiety about the whole question of taste.

Lynes proposes Clement Greenberg, the provocative art and cultural critic, as an exemplary highbrow. Whilst Greenberg's celebrated *Partisan Review* essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), relied on a binary model of culture, he soon began to comment disparagingly on an intermediate zone. In 1948, he claimed that popular culture, represented by the dime novel or Tin Pan Alley tunes, "has its social limits clearly marked out for it," while "middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere."¹¹ "The highbrow," remarks Lynes, after quoting this passage, "does not like to be confused."¹²

Greenberg's work was brought to prominence by Dwight Macdonald, an editor at *Partisan Review* in the thirties, who would later establish himself as "the Lord High Executioner of middlebrow culture."¹³ Macdonald introduced the term 'Midcult' to refer to pseudo-avant-gardism: "There is slowly emerging a tepid, flaccid Middlebrow Culture that threatens to engulf everything

in its spreading ooze. Bauhaus modernism has at last trickled down, in a debased form of course, into our furniture, cafeterias, movie theatres, ... office buildings.” He adds: “All this is not a raising of the level of Mass Culture, as might appear at first; but rather a corruption of High Culture. There is nothing more vulgar than sophisticated *kitsch*.”¹⁴ Macdonald, Greenberg and other hostile critics argued that the purveyors of middlebrow culture were driven by a profit motive, but disguised it using a rhetoric of cultural uplift.

In 1944, Macdonald argued that the previous variety of cultural and artistic forms was being replaced by homogeneity: “as in the business world, competition is now resulting in a merger. As in politics, everything and everybody are being integrated—“coordinated” the Nazis call it—into the official culture-structure.”¹⁵ For Macdonald, culture had become one more method of disciplining unruly citizens. One example of the newly political function of middlebrow cultural production can be found in the Armed Services Editions. Starting in 1943, the Council on Books in Wartime, in association with the American military, distributed almost 23 million books to service personnel, using the slogan “Books are weapons in the war of ideas.” Some titles were chosen for their educational value, and others as examples of good quality fiction, suitable for hours of leisure. They were all, as Alex H. Poole points out, supposed to represent a masculine viewpoint, and intended to help raise soldiers' morale.¹⁶

The Armed Services editions mimicked the methods of the popular book clubs established during the interwar years. The book club is an important topic in research on the middlebrow. Rather than assuming that they are paternalistic or coercive institutions, scholars have examined the clubs in nuanced ways, as sites where cultural value is negotiated. Two foundational accounts are Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* (1997). In both, the Book-of-the-Month Club, founded in 1926, receives particular attention. Rubin notes that it initially presented itself as “a nonprofit organization, a kind of mail-order public library,” similar to “adult education and museum outreach programmes.”¹⁷ This discourse of uplift was maintained for several decades, both in the Club's marketing material and in the minuted discussions of its Selection Committee. Yet, since it was not in fact a publicly-funded organisation, the Club needed to operate on a commercial basis, and therefore selected books that would appeal, above all, to affluent college graduates seeking to enhance their social capital. Undoubtedly, the Club contributed to the popularisation of certain modernists. For instance, it picked several of Ernest Hemingway's novels (either as *the* book of the month or as an alternate choice), and it introduced US readers to work by British writers such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Townsend-Warner. However, only a few of the Club's selections would later become part of the modernist canon, since in order to avoid alienating its subscribers, it favoured work that was accessible rather

than formally experimental. Typical choices, in the interwar years, were by authors such as Pearl S. Buck, Ellen Glasgow and James Gould Cozzens.¹⁸

Radway sees middlebrow culture as an effect of the dominance of modernism, both as aesthetic and as critical practice. She argues that the middlebrow “appeared only in the twentieth century when cultural entrepreneurs wedded a particular notion of culture to the production and distribution apparatus associated with supposedly lower forms.”¹⁹ Rubin, by contrast (following Lynes), traces the origins of the middlebrow back to the genteel cultural formations of the nineteenth century. She discusses the reforming American thinkers who believed with Matthew Arnold that a well-educated elite should both exemplify the highest cultural standards and help others to grasp them, thus fostering greater equality. As Rubin notes, “Armed with those convictions, Arnoldian intellectuals established museums, parks, symphony orchestras, and libraries”.²⁰ These were certainly “nonprofit organizations” in the commercial sense, but were founded on the principle that audiences would “profit,” in the intellectual sense, from cultural experiences. Non-literary manifestations of the middlebrow, in contexts such as museums, galleries and performance venues, have been relatively neglected by scholars. However, a wealth of new scholarship on the American middlebrow has appeared in the wake of Radway and Rubin's books, and while literary studies still dominates the field, work in art history, music, and film studies is gathering pace.²¹

Aspiration and non-reading

As soon as the new culture of upward mobility became visible in post-World War I America, authors began to satirise it. Often, these fictional accounts are characterised by affectionate irony – as, for instance, in the brilliant opening of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922):

The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings.²²

Babbitt, a bestselling novel that also garnered intellectual prestige, was both a part of middlebrow culture and a critique of it. Lewis targeted, in particular, the use of culture as a strategy for acquiring social prestige. He describes the Babbitt family's living room as follows:

On the table was a runner of gold-threaded Chinese fabric, four magazines, a silver box containing cigarette-crums, and three 'gift-books' – large, expensive editions of fairy-tales

illustrated by English artists and as yet unread by any Babbitt save Tinka. ... Against the wall was a piano, with another piano-lamp, but no one used it save Tinka. ... The books on the table were unspotted and laid in rigid parallels.²³

Ten-year-old Tinka is the only one whose response to music and literature is direct and unconditioned. The adults deploy books and music solely as part of a scheme of interior décor, designed to exhibit wealth and respectable tastes. In 1920s America, as Megan Benton notes, books – both as literary texts and as physical objects – were increasingly chosen in order to assert individual style. Many feared the imminent disappearance of book culture, yet in fact, the “cheap plenitude ... of the era’s burgeoning mass media helped to distill rather than dilute the traditional cultural stature of books,” since their format ensured “a permanent and enduring ‘ownership.’”²⁴ However, this did not necessarily entail a deeper engagement with the texts themselves, as Lewis and many others pointed out.

Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) similarly satirises the culture of self-improvement and upward mobility, and its reception history helps us understand the tangled relationship between modernism and the middlebrow. Like *Babbitt*, Loos's novel was a bestseller which was also admired by intellectuals. The book got caught up in contemporary debates about literary value, but it also intervenes in those debates. As Sarah Churchwell notes, Loos's text is “pervaded by contemporary anxieties about cultural capital, advertisement, imitation, and the middlebrow.”²⁵ The novel takes the form of a badly-spelled diary written by the flapper Lorelei Lee. Her purpose of acquiring wealth and social power is ineffectively concealed by her surface discourse of respectability and refinement. The gentlemen she meets are determined to educate her, taking her to museums and sending her books by authors ranging from Benvenuto Cellini to Joseph Conrad. But reading is not Lorelei's method of learning:

I seem to be quite depressed this morning as I always am when there is nothing to put my mind to. Because I decided not to read the book by Mr Cellini. I mean it was quite amusing in spots because it was really quite riskay but the spots were not so close together and I never seem to like to be hunting clear through a book for the spots I am looking for ... So I did not waste my time on it but this morning I told Lulu to let all of the house work go and spend the day reading a book entitled 'Lord Jim' and then tell me all about it, so that I would improve my mind while Gerry is away.²⁶

Lorelei continually imitates – whilst undermining - the language of self-help and the right use of leisure. She lays bare the fact that many people read simply in order to be able to talk impressively

about books. She herself is unable to “put her mind” to anything that does not lead to a more tangible form of profit.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes has an intimate relationship with mass culture. Its author was a screenwriter and its heroine is a film actress. It was published in *Harper's Bazaar*, a glossy fashion magazine, and adapted for cinema in 1928 and in 1953. At the other end of the scale, *Blondes* has an equally intimate relationship with modernism.²⁷ Some critics consider Loos as an active participant in the modernist project, arguing that the “deliberate depthlessness” of her prose “has some of Stein's cubist fascination with surface” and that “the ‘Lorelei’ style, ... a pure urban-pastoral medium of the 1920s,” influenced T.S. Eliot.²⁸ Others see *Blondes* as “a satire on modernist literary pretensions,”²⁹ or consider her an imitator – “a small mercenary practitioner of the school of Stein,” as Wyndham Lewis had it.³⁰ Faced with these contrary affiliations with high and low culture, we might compromise and place *Blondes* in the category of the middlebrow. Yet its primary satiric target *is* the middlebrow. It takes aim at the culture of reform, as well as the earnest efforts of middlebrow educators (Lorelei remarks wearily, ‘Mr Spoffard is going to take me around to all of the museums in Munchen, which are full of kunst that I really ought to look at.’)³¹ And its idiot heroine, with her feigned respectability, her aspirations and her rhetoric of accumulation, is a rather terrifying exemplar of the middlebrow world-view.

Tastemakers

“Well, I soon found out,” writes Lorelei in the sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1928), “that the most literary envirement in New York is the Algonquin Hotel, where all the literary geniuses eat their luncheon. Because every genius who eats his luncheon at the Algonquin Hotel is always writing that that is the place where all the great literary geniuses eat their luncheon.”³² The Algonquin Round Table was, indeed, generated by the culture of publicity that emerged in the twenties. Prominent members of this coterie of humourists, journalists, and editors included Franklin Pierce Adams, Alexander Woollcott, Robert Benchley, Harold Ross, and Dorothy Parker. Nina Miller explores the Round Table's cult of personality in relation to “the cultural register known as ‘middle-brow,’” which, she says, “comprised the most prominent area in the 1920s for the negotiation of modern selfhood.”³³ The Round Tablers had a complex relationship to modernism, epitomised by their location in midtown Manhattan, separate from – but adjacent to – the bohemian milieu of Greenwich Village. The Round Tablers were conservative in that they presented themselves as defenders of good taste in an era of commercialised mass entertainment, but at the same time, several of them, in Miller's words, “built their literary careers around an emphatically *inclusive* rhetorical mode.”³⁴ As an example of Dorothy Parker's inclusive style and refusal of

intellectual posturing, consider her review of André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (*Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 1925), which is often described as a Cubist novel:

The Counterfeiters is too tremendous a thing for praises. To say of it 'Here is a magnificent novel' is rather like gazing into the Grand Canyon and remarking, 'Well, well, well; quite a slice.' Doubtless you have heard that this book is not pleasant. Neither, for that matter, is the Atlantic Ocean.³⁵

Parker contributed a book column signed 'Constant Reader' to *The New Yorker* from 1927 to 1933. Her reviews praise the spare modern prose of Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, Sherwood Anderson and Ford Madox Ford, and mock the excesses – whether stylistic or emotional – of A. A. Milne, Elinor Glyn, Fannie Hurst and Emily Post. She comments on the formulaic nature of most magazine short fiction, but recommends the “good short stories” to be found “in the magazines with quieter covers, with smaller circulations, and with higher purchasing prices.”³⁶ In her role as tastemaker, then, Parker worked to expand the readership for modernist writing. And yet, as Miller observes, Parker and the other Round Tablers often “expressed their modernness more as a sense of anxious bewilderment than glib mastery.”³⁷ Of one book she was attempting to review, Parker wrote: “From the time I cracked its covers to that whirling moment, much later, when I threw myself exhausted on the bed, it had me licked.”³⁸

Several members of the Round Table were affiliated with at least one of the “smart” magazines, a category which included *The Smart Set*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, the *American Mercury*, *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Life*.³⁹ These were not modernist magazines. They published and discussed modernist art and literature, but they parodied and mocked it too. At the same time, they published work in realist and mass cultural genres, and parodied these as well. Daniel Tracy points out that the smart magazines “promised ... readers familiarity with a breadth of genres that might qualify as high culture,” while “their professional standing comes from a cultivated image of rational eclecticism.”⁴⁰ *Vanity Fair*, for example, published and discussed authors including Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell and e.e. cummings, and reproduced or photographed artwork by Georgia O'Keeffe, Jacob Epstein, Man Ray, and Arnold Genthe. Yet this material took up relatively few of the magazine's pages. Much more space was devoted to accessible authors (Sherwood Anderson, Edna St Vincent Millay), witty cartoonists (Anne Harriet Fish), or society photographers (Cecil Beaton). Readers were invited to explore and appreciate a range of genres and idioms. At the same time, the frequent use of parody worked against the modernist privileging of originality by demonstrating that anyone's style could be imitated. The smart magazines can be understood as middlebrow institutions because they offer a confident

critical discourse on high culture, but refuse to keep it separate from more popular or marketable art forms.

The editors of the smart magazines were powerful figures. Among the most high-profile were Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair*, H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, co-editors of *The Smart Set* and subsequently of *The American Mercury*, and Harold Ross, founding editor of *The New Yorker*.⁴¹ Their careers reveal one of the paradoxes of middlebrow culture: these men were viewed as tastemakers for the nation, yet their preferences were defined in opposition to those of average Americans. Seeking to consolidate their authority, the editors policed the boundaries of their supposedly select readership, sometimes by including difficult material and sometimes by ridiculing lowbrow tastes. Yet they were dependent on revenue from enterprises that catered to those very tastes – for instance, Mencken and Nathan supported the loss-making *Smart Set* by editing several pulp magazines: *Parisienne*, *Saucy Stories*, and *Black Mask*.⁴²

The black periodical press was strongly oriented towards the pedagogical and purposeful side of middlebrow culture. Some of the key magazines were organs of racial uplift organisations – *The Crisis*, for instance, was founded as the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Catherine Keyser observes: “The contrast between the titles of black press magazines from the 1920s and smart magazines from that period indicate their divergent goals for their readers. The black middle class should focus on remedying ‘*The Crisis*’ and seeking ‘*Opportunity*,’ the magazine titles suggest. Meanwhile, the white middle class could fritter away its time on the latest ‘*Vogue*’ on display at ‘*Vanity Fair*.’”⁴³ The black press did take up the discourses of wit and sophistication that characterised the smart magazines, but “modeled versions of humour and irony that could support racial political goals.”⁴⁴ Like other magazines, *The Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *The Messenger* were financed largely by advertising, but the adverts they ran were often for correspondence courses, schools, and insurance, or for consumer products made by black-owned businesses. They were closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance, and helped to develop the careers of important authors, visual artists, and editors including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and Jessie Fauset.⁴⁵

Both the Harlem periodicals and the smart magazines were in the middle of the market, in terms of price, audience size, and cultural level. They explicitly addressed a minority audience of intelligent readers, yet their influence was greater than their circulation figures might suggest. This was partly because of the celebrity status of their editors, and partly because they helped to consecrate certain artists and authors, and so had a lasting effect on the American canon. Such mid-range periodicals provided an intermediate space, between the artist and author-centred production model of the little magazines and the thoroughly market-driven model of the daily papers, mass-circulation weeklies, and pulp magazines.

Yet these more ephemeral print forms themselves participated in the discussion and dissemination of modernism. Although pulp magazines belonged primarily to the lowbrow stratum of the print marketplace, they were nevertheless crucial to the circulation and popularisation of American modernism. Erin Smith in *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (2000) and David Earle in *Re-covering Modernism* (2009) point to the frequent appearances of texts by canonical modernist authors in pulps, mid-century men's magazines, and also lurid paperback formats. These print venues attracted opprobrium from more intellectual commentators, not only because of the perceived standardisation of the writing they published, but also because of their moral rigidity.⁴⁶ Yet as Earle points out, in the 1910s:

mass-circulated magazines were the training ground for the entire spectrum of writers and styles. ... Djuna Barnes published poetry in *All-Story*, *The Cavalier*, and *Pearson's*, next to pulp authors like Max Brand and Edgar Rice Burroughs; ... Robert M. Coates could publish simultaneously in *Telling Tales* and little magazines like *Broom* and *Gargoyle*; Dawn Powell's first publications were in *Snappy Stories*.⁴⁷

One of the more distinctive periodicals that Earle discusses is the interwar reprint magazine *Golden Book*. Printed on pulp paper and sold at newsstands, *Golden Book* can nevertheless be described as a modernist outlet. It featured innovative art deco covers, and published authors including Katherine Mansfield, Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson and Dorothy Parker. Their texts were interspersed with adverts for adult education programmes, correspondence courses, encyclopedias and other apparatuses of self-improvement. This mix of content suggests that the magazine appealed to the upwardly mobile working class. The same was true of, for instance, detective fiction magazines: Smith notes that the 'hard-boiled' stories they published often "functioned as 'how-to' manuals in class mobility for working-class readers, complete with stage directions on how to move, what to wear, and what to purchase."⁴⁸ So, although 'lowbrow' in terms of prestige and production values, cheaper print forms such as pulps can nevertheless fulfil middlebrow functions.

As to the daily press, Karen Leick observes that by the late 1920s, "references to the distinctiveness of modern writing regularly appeared in mainstream newspapers."⁴⁹ She points to the influence of journalists such as Harry Hansen, whose literary column for the daily *New York World* was, from 1931, syndicated so that it reached over a million readers across America. Hansen focused on literary gossip as news, and paid frequent attention to figures such as Gertrude Stein. But while some journalists made serious attempts to understand or define new art forms such as stream-of-consciousness prose, others remained baffled, and resorted to ridicule. Leonard Diepeveen explains in *Modernist Fraud: Hoax, Parody, Deception* (2019):

Modernism's loudest skeptics didn't see modernism merely as bad art, they didn't see it as art at all... Citing their own integrity in the face of art, experts, and a public gone mad, ... these recalcitrant readers publicly walked away from modernism and the interpretive practices rising in its defense.⁵⁰

Arguably, both reactions – on the one hand, the attempt to grasp and explain what modernism was all about, and on the other, the rejection of it as a kind of insanity – can be characterised as middlebrow. Taken together, they epitomise the ambivalence of the middlebrow towards high culture: its balancing between fascination and scepticism, between effortful engagement and detached mockery.

Conclusion

The advertisement I quoted from at the start of this essay appeared in the November 1926 issue of *Vanity Fair*. In that same issue, there is a piece by Sherwood Anderson on factories, responding to mass production with both fascination and fear: “The great factory then, for all its wonders, remains a threat to the individualist, the workman ... I express it in words because I am a workman in words.”⁵¹ The presentation of the writer as artisan is a middlebrow gesture, since it pulls against the rarefied notions of creativity (genius, inspiration, the masterpiece) that animate modernist discourse. The culture of the middlebrow is, ultimately, an assemblage of gestures, attitudes, desires and debates. Irreducible to a plot or formula, it cannot be represented, for instance, by any individual novel. Rather, we can see it taking shape through institutions – for instance, magazines or a book clubs, as they extend over time, shifting position, fostering discussion, and engaging different audiences with different elements of their offering. Institutions such as clubs and periodicals are commercial enterprises: they yoke self-improvement to consumption and present it as a moral imperative. As tastemakers, they may broaden cultural horizons, but they also have a coercive function. As Bourdieu reminds us, “tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes,” and aspirational consumers must learn what to reject, as much as what to admire, purchase, view or read.⁵² In the earlier twentieth century, a crucial aspect of middlebrow pedagogy involved learning about modernism, and audiences were invited to approach it in a spirit of curiosity rather than commitment.

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¹ M.C.M., 'Don't Pry, Little Girl, Don't Pry', *Vanity Fair* (November 1926), p. 47.

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- ² On book series, see Lise Jaillant's chapter in this volume.
- ³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), p. 53.
- ⁴ For an overview of scholarship on middlebrow print enterprises, see Faye Hammill and Mark Hussey, *Modernism's Print Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 138-50.
- ⁵ John Guillory, 'The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture', *Transition*, 67 (1995): 82-92, p. 87.
- ⁶ Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book- of- the- Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle- Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 9-10.
- ⁷ See for example: Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018); David Carter, *Always Almost Modern: Australian print cultures and modernity* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013); Erica van Boven and Mathijis Sanders, "A Cream Pie with Rat Poison: *La Madone* in the Netherlands," *Relief* 9.1 (2015), pp. 77-88; Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith, *Magazines, Travel, and Middlebrow Culture: Canadian periodicals, 1925-1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
- ⁸ Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1915), pp. 7-8.
- ⁹ Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 5.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 313, p. 317, p. 319, p. 318, p. 331.
- ¹¹ Clement Greenberg, in "The State of American Writing, 1948: A Symposium," *Partisan Review* 15 (August 1948): 876-879, p. 879.
- ¹² Lynes, *Tastemakers*, p. 314.
- ¹³ Louis Menand, "Browbeaten: Dwight Macdonald's war on Midcult," *The New Yorker* (5 September 2011): 72-78, p. 72.
- ¹⁴ Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* 1.3 (1953): 1-17, p. 7.
- ¹⁵ Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Popular Culture," *Politics* 1.1 (1944): 20-23, p. 21.
- ¹⁶ Alex H. Poole, "As Popular as Pin-Up Girls": The Armed Services Editions, Masculinity, and Middlebrow Print Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States," *Information & Culture* 52.4 (2017): 462-486.
- ¹⁷ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 130.
- ¹⁸ Book clubs were rarely closely affiliated with modernism, except for the Poetry Book Society, founded in 1953 by a group including T. S. Eliot and Basil Blackwell.
- ¹⁹ Radway, *Feeling*, p. 367 n. 4.
- ²⁰ Rubin, *Making*, p. 15.
- ²¹ See the bibliography at www.middlebrow-network.com.
- ²² Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 1.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
- ²⁴ Megan Benton, "'Too Many Books': Book Ownership and Cultural Identity in the 1920s," *American Quarterly* 49.2 (1997): 268-97, p. 272.
- ²⁵ Sarah Churchwell, "'Lost among the ads': *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the Politics of Imitation," in Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds, *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003): 135-64, p. 135.
- ²⁶ Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 13.
- ²⁷ For detail see Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), pp. 58-65.

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- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- ³³ Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern: The Intimate Public Worlds of New York's Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 88.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ³⁵ Constant Reader [Dorothy Parker], "Recent Books," *The New Yorker* (22 October 1927): 98-101, p. 101.
- ³⁶ Constant Reader [Dorothy Parker], "Reading and Writing," *The New Yorker* (17 December 1927): 109-111, p. 109.
- ³⁷ Miller, *Making Love*, p. 98.
- ³⁸ Constant Reader [Dorothy Parker], "Reading and Writing," *The New Yorker* (15 September 1928): 100-103, p. 100.
- ³⁹ *Life* in the 1920s shared contributors, formats, and tone with the 'smart' magazines. But in 1936 it became a news weekly.
- ⁴⁰ Daniel Tracy, "Investing in 'Modernism': Smart Magazines, Parody, and Middlebrow Professional Judgment," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 1.1 (2010): 38-63, p. 42, p. 43. See also Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 154-163; Michael Murphy, "'One Hundred per Cent Bohemia': Pop Decadence and the Aestheticization of Commodity in the Rise of the Slicks," in Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt, eds., *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996): 61-89.
- ⁴¹ See Sharon Hamilton, "The First New Yorker? The Smart Set Magazine, 1900-1924," *The Serials Librarian* 37.2 (1999): 89-104; Faye Hammill, "The New Yorker, the Middlebrow and the Periodical Marketplace in 1925," in Fiona Green, ed., *Writing for the New Yorker: Critical Essays on an American Periodical* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015): 17-35.
- ⁴² See David M. Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks and the Prejudice of Form* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), especially pp. 17-26, pp. 51-59.
- ⁴³ Catherine Keyser, *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 83-84.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ⁴⁵ See Pamela Caughie, "'The Best People': The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie in Writings of the Negro Renaissance," *Modernism/modernity* 20.3 (2013): 519-37; Rachel Farebrother, "The Crisis (1910-1934)" in Andrew Thacker and Peter Brooker, eds., *Modernist Magazines: A Critical and Cultural History. Vol 2: North America, 1880-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 103-24.
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- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ⁴⁸ Erin Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 105.
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⁵⁰ Leonard Diepeveen, *Modernist Fraud: Hoax, Parody, Deception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 2.

⁵¹ Sherwood Anderson, 'A Great Factory', *Vanity Fair* (November 1926): 51-52, p. 52.

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