

'The Social Hieroglyphic': Modernist Reading Practices and their Afterlives (NeMLA 2023)

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Anticipating notions of modern cryptography, Marx famously observed in *Capital* Vol. I, that value “does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.” Therefore, to understand the “product of [this] labour”--the commodity form--we must learn how to read (as in, decode) the “social hieroglyphic.” Reading, for Marx, thus becomes a site of significant contention as it leads to the making and unmaking of our social world. This panel seeks to examine ways in which the modernist era encountered processes of “social hieroglyph[y]” in the literary marketplace and turned the act of reading into a distinct practice with serious stakes. While modernists like Gertrude Stein and Bob Brown (1929-30) were developing their reading-machines (e.g. the “readie”) as Sue Currell has shown, newer manuals such as Walter Pitkin’s *The Rapid Reading* (1929) and James Mursell’s *Streamline Your Mind* (1936) with their experiments on eye-training were rapidly transforming the scene of reading. At the same time, works like Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) and E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) were setting up two opposing poles of writerly fidelity: form versus life. By 1932, as Heather Fielding (2018) shows, Woolf would critique the middlebrow writer for “incoherently refusing to choose between these two sides.” On the other hand, to echo Adrian Bingham (2004), the popular press was transforming the general public’s reading habits for good. Women’s magazines like *Good Housekeeping* (1922) and *Woman’s Own* (1932) were attracting audiences and even tabloids like *The Daily Mail* were beginning to devote exclusive pages to women’s issues, celebrity news, and “housewifery.” Punctuating these tectonic shifts in the literary marketplace, of course, were the ravages of WWI and the interwar years of political upheaval and psychological remaking. Taking into account these complex negotiations, how do we decrypt the social hieroglyphics of modernist reading practices?

We seek paper proposals on topics that include, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Modernist writers as readers and theorists
- Scenes of reading/writing in modernist works
- Modernist lecture tours, public readings, and radio broadcasts

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- Wartime reading/reading in the trenches/wartime communications
- Circulation of newspapers, magazines, and propaganda
- Modernism and ways of reading (close reading, distant reading, middle reading, mere reading, surface reading, micro-sociological reading, reparative reading, paranoid reading, weak theory, and such likes)
- Technologies/techniques of modernist readings (e.g. gramophone, radio, collage, montage, reading machines, etc.)
- Modernism between critique (New Criticism, Frankfurt School and their afterlives) and post-critique (Sedgwick, Latour, Felski, and others)

Contact Info:

This accepted NeMLA panel seeks to examine ways in which the modernist era encountered processes of “social hieroglyph[y]” in the literary marketplace and turned the act of reading into a distinct practice with serious stakes.

Please consider sending an abstract by **September 30** to <https://www.cfplist.com/nemla/Home/CFP>. For more information or questions/concerns, feel free contact **Anwita Ghosh** at aghosh6@fordham.edu (PhD Candidate, Department of English, Fordham University).

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