



Modernism, Mass Culture and Professionalism (Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture)

Thomas Strychacz

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In *Modernism, Mass Culture and Professionalism* Thomas Strychacz argues that modernist writers need to be understood both in their relationship to professional critics and in their relationship to an era and ethos of professionalism. In studying four modernist writers--Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos and Nathanael West--Strychacz finds that contrary to what most studies suggest, modernist writers (in the period of 1880-1940) are thoroughly caught up in the ideas and expressive forms of mass culture rather than opposed to them. Despite this, modernist writers seek to distinguish their ideas and styles from mass culture, particularly by making their works esoteric. In doing so, modernist writers are reproducing one of the main tenets of all professional groups, which is to gain social authority by forming a community around a difficult language inaccessible to the public at large. While their modernism arises out of the nature of their encounter with mass culture, that encounter frequently overturns commonly-held notions of the nature of modernism. Finally Strychacz explores his own world of academia and observes that the work of professional critics in the university reproduces the strategies of modernist writers.

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