

Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity,*

Currency Press, Sydney, 2005.

ISBN 0868197556 (PB)

As Jill Julius Matthews concedes in her new book, the term 'modernity' can be used to refer to any period between the Renaissance and the present, lasting anywhere between five centuries and fifteen years. There has been a tendency for academics to avoid meticulously the use of the term without first being careful to define and problematize it. The period from the 1890s to the 1920s which is Matthews' focus is the best period to study Australian modernity if we are to define it in the most useful way – not as an historical juncture, but as a state of mind: the sense contemporaries had of their *own* modernity, an awareness of a break with the past, of an exhilarating and also frightening sense that they were negotiating uncharted territory.

This is precisely the approach Matthews takes. Her study falls into a period in which Australians were intensely and self-consciously aware of their own modernity. A great many of them inhabited cities where the pace of life, the rush of the crowd, the dinging of tram bells and the tall buildings rising overhead all knitted together to form a distinctly 'modern' experience. By the 1920s Sydney's (and also Melbourne's) population reached the million mark, placing it alongside the great 'world cities'. We cannot assume, however, that modernity belonged exclusively to the city. It was not just urban but also rural Australians who were experiencing the modern drive to be 'up-to-date' in these years. The modes of modernity were mobilised in a reforming effort to save the rural sector from its inevitable decline. Radio and other civilising, modern conveniences, it was thought, would make the country-dweller feel part of the world and thus happy in his or her station.

Matthews' task, however, is to trace the modernity of the inhabitants of Sydney. She is less interested in the 'great forces of modernisation' than in

how people experienced modernity in their daily lives, how they lived it sensorily, and how they (and particularly young women) came to embody it. Her project is thus a consciously democratic one, in the tradition of what has been called 'vernacular modernity', which explores the experience of modernity as articulated and mediated through mass-produced fashion and, in particular, cinema. 'Romance' is a (mostly) successful organising motif for Matthews' story, uniting many different discourses in a 'tale of modern romance, of heroic adventures and impassioned desire'.

Matthews paints the confrontation between two 'bands of heroes' (show business entrepreneurs and Sydney's cultural and political elites) who were responsible for mediating or 'conjuring' modernity and its meanings to the city and its people. Show business figures were the 'modern princes' delivering the romance of modernity into everyday life, while elites encouraged the people towards a productivist (versus consumerist) ethic and a higher conception of art, decrying 'Americanis(z)ation'. In the process, the people of Sydney 'forged an identity as modern Australians and modern citizens of the world'. Matthews' Sydney is not an insular colonial outpost, but comprises an outwards-looking population living within an international network of connectivity. Its modernity is not merely 'borrowed' (in 1913, Jessie Ackermann accused Australians of being 'given to copy rather than originate or evolve') but adapted and coloured by the local. The story is thus distinctly Australian, but does not 'pretend singularity' in the way of some traditional national histories.

Not surprisingly, given her expertise in the tracing of representations of femininity, Matthews does not neglect the important metaphoric role of the 'modern girl' in articulating Australian modernity. Young women were the 'spectacular' face of modernity (as Liz Conor's new book *The Spectacular Modern Woman* suggests) as well as symbolising its rotten core. The 'game' of analysing the modern girl was played by contemporaries as a way to voice fears regarding the rapid pace of social change. Anxieties about modern consumerism in particular became tied up with the modern young woman. A prime target of modern commerce, her slim form was also used to *sell*

modernity. Matthews is well read in feminist scholarship addressing modern consumerism and the commodification of the female body, and her exploration of Sydney's modernity is informed by this work.

Matthews is more concerned, however, with celebrating the liberating qualities of commercial modernity for ordinary young women. Even for working-class girls, participation in the 'democratic dream' of modernity could be bought for the price of a movie ticket or a fan magazine. Although the celebratory nature of Matthews' exploration of this theme, in which the 'possibility of being modern' for women is determined by what they wear and otherwise consume, might sit a little uneasily, it is a truism that the revolutionary social shifts effected by the 'modern woman' (who insisted on her right to move freely in public space, to mix with men, and to discard her corsets, long hair, and other indicators of her essential sexual difference) cannot be understood in isolation from the history of modern consumerism.

Indeed, Matthews' approach to her wider subject matter assumes that the 'democratisation of luxury' fostered by the market was a prime mediator of modernity for the ordinary citizens of Sydney. The book is an important contribution to the literature on consumerism and the modernity of selling, with 'romance' working as the perfect conceptual medium for Matthews' tracing of the intricate connections between the 'modern' dreams and desires of the people of Sydney, and an increasingly sophisticated commercial sector. Her chapter on the magnates of cinema in Australia uncovers the 'infrastructure of modernity' underlying everyday experience, in celebration of an international, commercial modernity that is not vulgar and destructive, but an enabling and liberating embodiment of the 'dream of the modern'.

All this makes one wonder how Matthews will treat the elite 'wowsers' opposers of commercial modernity in the last stages of her book, but her examination of Sydney's 'elites' proves to be well observed and nuanced. Historians, as she comments, have often depicted elite responses to the modern world as being reducible to an 'undifferentiated anti-modernism'. Such approaches fail to capture the complex nature of elite negotiations of modernity. Matthews

remains true to her intention to evoke the international context for these engagements, examining the role of Sydney's elites in trans-national networks that sought to harness the potential of modernity while checking its excesses.

Dance Hall and Picture Palace is a mature and joyous work. Matthew's achievement is limited by only one major factor: that her organising trope of the 'romance' of modernity is used to characterise the whole, long period from 1890 to the late 1920s, in a curiously ahistorical manner. Modernity – the experience of change and the modes in which its attendant anxieties and excitements are articulated – is by nature anything but static. These nuances are difficult to capture, but the reader feels that Matthews might have been more vigilant in the attempt. The experience of the First World War in particular altered the discourse around modernity in significant ways, a factor Matthews fails to consider in any detail. Notwithstanding this criticism, Matthews' intent to uncover the 'constitutive processes' through which ordinary people experienced modernity is adeptly achieved, taking the intimate local experience of ordinary residents of Sydney, as well as the wider international context from which this experience was inextricable, in its purview. The quality of Matthew's scholarship, along with the beauty and energy of her prose, allow the reader to inhabit the 'romance' of rapid change in Sydney. It is pleasing to see Australian modernity firmly on the scholarly agenda, with a conference, 'Australian Modernities: Vernacular Performers and Consumers', coming up in December at the University of Queensland. Matthews will deliver the opening keynote address at the conference.

Kate Murphy,

School of Historical Studies, Monash University.