

Composite Modernity (Online, 24–25 Sep 25)

Online, Sep 24–25, 2025

Deadline: May 30, 2025

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“Cultures are never unitary in themselves,
nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Others.”

Homi Bhabha, 1988,
‘The Commitment to Theory’.

TFISM (Transition: Forum for Interdisciplinary Studies into Modernity) has already organised two previous conferences, “Reflecting/Reflected Modernity” (2021) and “Ugly Modernity” (2023). Following on these projects, which were concerned with the formation of modernity within the humanities from a cross-disciplinary perspective, our new forum will comprise “Composite Modernity: The Compressed and the Displaced” (exp. 2025), extending our discussion of contradictory moments of modernity.

Modernity is not a stable concept. Instead, it is highly fluid and multi-constituent, bridging multiple disciplines and discourses. We apply ‘composite’ as a postcolonial scope to relocate a given culture’s relativist intertextuality, which develops along with intercultural modernism as a global phenomenon. Within this postmodernist realism, we have consistently failed to conceive modernity as a fixation with any predetermined sources. Rather, within the complex enunciation of humanity, modernity/modernities are multi-centred, open-ended, and hybrid. The postmodernist scope problematises the approach to a sharp-edged modern culture, which is no longer valid for interpreting concrete experiences in dynamic variations of the differences. Our conference, “Composite Modernity: The Compressed and the Displaced”, therefore attempts to enable a retrospective view of considering Otherness by problematising any predetermined definition of cultural boundaries.

We invite scholars working in the humanities, therefore, to consider ‘composite’ as a term denoting hybridity, multiples, and as a collectivist effort by many cultures rather than any monocultures. ‘Composite modernity’ aims to unfeel the illusion of ‘unity or totality’ of culture in the Self/Other dualism, envisioning the ambivalence in a continuous integrated process with open-ended semiotic transformation. The cultural-historiographical engagements in the sites of the compressed and the displaced probe methodologies to decipher rather than mythologise narratives of hybridity. We include the terms ‘compressed’ and ‘displaced’ as addendums to modernity, with compression denoting an acceleration of the modern transactional transition, as mentioned in Chang Kyung-Sup’s *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* (2022). Modernity’s postcolonial contradictions become a coexistence of antithesis and complicity, both of which are necessary to describe its plurality, its hybridity, and its syncretism. The ‘displaced’, then, refers to geographical or cultural

exiles and movements which correlate with notions of being out of place and, like Edward Said writes in *Out of Place*, something irrecoverable, a feeling of dissonance, and an inability of finding your identity in one particular place.

For instance, Orientalism has been sustained by a dual structure that often perpetuates a mythologised sign of authenticity with an assumption of collectivity. Perceived as a static, constitutive structure, this framework fails to represent the endless transformation of a hybridised subjectivity (of displacement, ambivalence, or mimicry), which “both belongs and does not belong to the history of Western rationality” in Grace Lavery’s terms.

The composite nature of modern identity is particularly prevalent when discussing visual artists. This holds true for, for example, the case of the Indonesian artist Raden Saleh, who the Dutch colonial government-sponsored, then possessing the ‘Dutch East Indies’, to become a painter in Europe. Similar to Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of mimicry, Saleh imitates and subverts western painting to be both a romantic Europeanised artist as well as the colonised intellectual who is now heralded as Javanese artistic modernism. Or Raja Ravi Varma, who brought European history painting to British-owned India and so mythologised his country’s history. From a European perspective, the dialectic of Self and Other is often more violent. An act of consumption concerning that considered Other, the objectification of cultures and their use in universal exhibitions was particularly prevalent during the nineteenth and early twentieth century; indeed, when modernity was shaping itself.

In the field of English literature, many critics have developed and even challenged the concept of modernism/modernity. As a co-authored essay “The New Modernist Studies” (2008) in *PLMA* by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz puts it, they have “expanded” the scope of modernist studies, employing more global perspectives. In responding to this new scholarly trend, for example, Johan Ramazani (2009) finds “more complex patterns of assimilation and resistance” in post-colonial relationships suggested by Edward Said. Modernism and modernity, thus, should be understood in a more dynamic but also a more nuanced way.

How can we decipher the modernist myth? How do we mobilise intercultural experiences in specific contexts with ongoing instability and constantly reshaping social identities? How can individuals in an era of so-called compressed modernity relocate differences and yet still feel specific fixations of Otherness? How do cultural, artistic, and literary activities react or resist the discrepancy to retain a liberal domain in the post-historical era? How can we consider culture as a result or product but equally remain aware of its tendencies to awaken or suppress potential social revolutions?

This forum invites researchers who explore intercultural experiences in transitional, dialectical, and intermediary reformations embodied in any forms of cultural activities, including art, literature, film and plays, cultural critiques, historical writings, and institutional practices. We look at the following issues from within the humanities, particularly literature and art history. We particularly welcome papers looking at the following themes and topics:

Technology and humanity
Cultural O/otherness
Gender politics

Ecology and posthumanism
Imperialism, nationalism, globalisation
Multiple modernities
Institutional narratives
Anti-colonial nationalisms
Transnationalism

This will be a digital conference taking place on 24-25 September 2025. Please submit an abstract (max. 300 words) and a short bio (max. 200 words) for a 20-minute paper to transition.tfism@gmail.com by 30 May 2025.

Reference:

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