



# History of a Shiver: The Sublime Impudence of Modernism

*Jed Rasula*

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An abrupt break in the prevailing modes of artistic expression, for many, marks the advent of modernism in the early twentieth century, but revisionary attempts to pin down a precise moment of its emergence remain disputed. *History of a Shiver* proffers a different approach, tracing the first inkling of modernism instead to the nineteenth century's fascination with music.

As Jed Rasula deftly shows, *melomania*--the passion for music--gave rise to concepts like Richard Wagner's "endless melody" and the Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art, which in turn infused the arts of the *fin de siècle* with an aura of expectancy, challenging them to induce musical effects by their own means. With each art aspiring to produce the effects of another artistic medium, a synesthetic yearning ran like a shiver through the body of art that would emerge over the next half century. Rasula traces this pan-arts polyphony from German Romantic theory to early experiments in "visual music," encompassing such diverse phenomena as American fixation on Arcadia, early film theory, and the lure of the fourth dimension. All the while, he keeps focus on the paramount historical consequence in elevating music to a new universal aesthetic standard, arguing that Wagnerism was first among modern "isms."

In surveying this momentous interplay among arts, *History of a Shiver* ranges from literature, music and painting to theatre, cinema, dance, photography, and civic pageantry. It retells the story of modernism by recovering not an idea, but a feeling--the hair-raising potential for each painting, literary text, or musical composition to herald an unprecedented domain of human enterprise.

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