

<p>Institution: University of Liverpool</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 29 – English Language and Literature</p>
<p>Title of case study: British art and tradition: exploring an eclectic cultural heritage</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This study outlines the ways in which Alexandra Harris, Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool, has engaged public interest in modern British art and literature. Harris has demonstrably encouraged both art-world professionals and members of the public to appreciate more fully the rich variety of modern British art, and to realise its contemporary relevance in exploring British landscapes and identities. Between September 2010 and July 2013, her books, radio programmes, literary festival appearances, and collaborations with art galleries have had a major impact on cultural life. They have helped to raise the profile of British painting, and brought diverse audiences to challenging literature (especially the work of Virginia Woolf). They have heightened public consciousness of the ways in which contemporary debates and indeed the habits of daily life can be informed by cultural history, giving ‘the long view’ on national identity, notions of ‘home’ and tradition, and particularly the potent relationships between art and place.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The largest body of underpinning research for this impact was published in Harris’s book <i>Romantic Moderns</i> (published 2010; based on AHRC-funded doctoral research at the University of Oxford 2004-7 and as Lecturer at the University of Liverpool 2007-10). Focusing on the period 1930-45, the book traced a broad shift in English art and literature away from explicit radicalism and towards new relationships with landscape, locality, inheritance and tradition. The research involved extensive reading of periodicals, anthologies, guidebooks and correspondence from the period, as well as informed close analysis of literature, art and music. By developing intimate knowledge of the period’s cultural debates, Harris was able to show how artists and writers opened up new dialogues between past and present, and between English tradition and international modernism.</p> <p>The research for <i>Romantic Moderns</i> was innovative in a number of ways. It emphasised the place-consciousness of modernism. It argued for the significance of ‘taste’, studying not only the art produced in the period, but the shifting reputation and popularity of work from the past. And it demonstrated the pervasiveness of ideas across art forms high and low: the validity of the argument rested on a truly interdisciplinary approach incorporating painting, literature, food, gardening, architecture and design.</p> <p>As a direct result of <i>Romantic Moderns</i>, Harris received numerous commissions which allowed her to shape and revise public understanding of twentieth-century art; four essays for exhibition catalogues are cited below. A show of E. McKnight Kauffer’s graphic work (Estorick Collection, 2011) provided the occasion for Harris to work with extensive archive material, assessing the role of Kauffer’s design work in shaping modern taste. An exhibition of five artists at the Slade before WWI (Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2013) occasioned an interdisciplinary essay on group identity and elegy, relating the paintings on display to contemporary writing by D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf.</p> <p>Harris’s <i>Virginia Woolf</i> was published in 2011 (research carried out 2009-11 at the University of Liverpool). It covers much ground already familiar to specialists but refreshes the material by making new juxtapositions and by incorporating new research findings throughout (eg. on Woolf’s reading in 1910, and connections between <i>Orlando</i> and other novels). Harris has been concerned to shift the focus away from Woolf’s much-sensationalised illness and death towards a new appreciation of locality and tradition in Woolf’s writing, and the passionate, conscious daily living in which her novels are a continuous education.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

3. References to the research

- Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination, from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010) [REF2 output]

Winner of the 2010 Guardian First Book Award (judged by a panel of writers including Richard Holmes and Adam Foulds, in collaboration with a national network of Waterstones reading groups), and a Somerset Maugham Award from the Society of Authors (judged by writers William Fiennes, M.J. Hyland, and Rachel Cusk). It was also shortlisted for the Duff Cooper Prize for Non-Fiction, and was chosen as a 'Book of the Year' by commentators including Andrew Motion, Peter Conrad, Charles Saumarez-Smith, and Alastair Sooke.

Extensive review coverage of *RM* praised its 'extraordinary breadth' (*Times*) and noted that it is 'emphatically a book about how we live ... about how we are shaped by history and culture' (*Observer*).

- Alexandra Harris, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011; paperback 2013) [REF2 output]

VW was described as 'a miracle of clarity and concision... one could hardly ask for a better inducement to read, or re-read, more' (*Washington Post*). 'This is the kind of provocative shift of the lens at which Harris excels', according to a review in the *Times Higher*.

- Alexandra Harris, 'The Road South' in *John Piper in Kent and Sussex*, exhibition catalogue ed. by Nathaniel Hepburn (Kent: Mascall's Gallery, 2011)

- Alexandra Harris, 'Introduction' in *The Poster King: E. McKnight Kauffer*, exhibition catalogue (London: Estorick Collection, 2011)

- Alexandra Harris, 'Sutherland's Metamorphoses' in *Graham Sutherland: Unfinished Worlds*, exhibition catalogue (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2012)

- Alexandra Harris 'We Are Making a New World: Art, Youth, and War' in *A Crisis of Brilliance*, exhibition catalogue ed. by David Boyd Haycock (London: Scala, 2013)

Harris won the Julia Briggs Memorial Prize (2009) for work on Woolf; and a Leverhulme Fellowship (2011-2) for her new project, *The Weather Glass* (£41,000).

4. Details of the impact

Writing in the *Times* (July 2011), James Fox cited *Romantic Moderns* as 'one of the first signs' that 'Modern British art is back'. The book provided an intellectual framework for many exhibitions of British art staged in 2011-13, and in some cases directly influenced the curators. Introducing an evening devoted to Graham Sutherland, Michael Stanley, Director of Modern Art Oxford, said that 'Alexandra Harris has been one of the main forces behind the surge of interest in British art which has led to the exhibition of Sutherland in Oxford and Tate's landmark show *Picasso and Modern British Art* in London'. Considering its revaluation of British art, writer Martin Gayford identified *Romantic Moderns* as a powerful intervention in political debate about national identity: 'it's a book that makes you think freshly about the perennially puzzling questions of what it means to be British' (*Sunday Telegraph*).

Harris has taken an energetic role in furthering this new interest in art and national culture: she has written catalogue essays; lectured regularly in galleries; worked with Sotheby's to promote modern British collections. Evidence of her sustained and high-profile influence came in Spring 2012 when the Royal Academy proposed that she stage an exhibition at Burlington House.

Practising artists, including Turner Prize-shortlisted George Shaw, have cited Harris's research as the prompt for new engagement with the history of British painting. The painter Stephen Taylor wrote that *RM* gave him 'hope that all was not lost for British art' (correspondence, 2012), and

Impact case study (REF3b)

turned increasingly from abstraction to locality. *Romantic Moderns* gave draughtsman and print-maker Jonathan Newdick an expanded context for his work on vernacular buildings, and in return Harris provided a preface for Newdick's 2012 book *Out of Time*. The writer Richard Mabey (frequently hailed as 'the greatest living naturalist') wrote that *Romantic Moderns* had been 'tremendously helpful to [him] personally' in writing about the twentieth-century relationship between literature and land.

Broader public interest in Harris's work is evidenced by the sales figures for her books. *Romantic Moderns* sold 16,800 in the assessment period; Public Lending Right figures show 2750 public library loans in 2012. *Virginia Woolf* sold 9,000 copies in the assessment period.

Harris has used the internet to make her work widely available. Extracts from *Romantic Moderns* are featured on her [website](#), along with links to her events diary, journalism and media work. Traffic has been high, with a monthly average of c.1300 visits (see section 5).

Both books have attracted extensive media coverage, bringing the subject-matter to a diverse audience. *Romantic Moderns* was reviewed in all the national broadsheets, many foreign newspapers, a range of magazines from the *Spectator* to *Country Life* to *Tribune*, and numerous local papers. It was featured on BBC 2's *Review Show* (average audience 376,000), and on national and local radio stations with varying audience demographics from Radio 3 to Five Live. Media discussion of the *Guardian* First Book Award focused on the potential for academic research to inspire general audiences, responding to Claire Armitstead's claim that 'Harris's book is a reminder of how important higher education is to literature' (*Guardian*, 2011).

Romantic Moderns and its offshoots have brought diverse audiences to British art and to writers such as Elizabeth Bowen and Henry Green. Reviewers have noted Harris's balance of rigour and accessibility: 'Lesser-known aspects of Woolf's character – such as her humour, tenacity, and flair for friendship – are brought movingly to the fore in this crisp, insightful, and mercifully down-to-earth literary biography' (*Telegraph*). The *Daily Mail* ran a double spread encouraging its readers (circulation c.2,050,000) to try Woolf: 'by the final page Harris has made you desperate to tackle the novels'. At a 'School of Life' workshop (July 2013), Harris led an audience through a structured 'menu' of conversation topics, inviting participants (most of whom had no literary background) to use Woolf's ideas in thinking about place and tradition in their own lives. Harris has brought scholarship to the **high street** by collaborating with *Toast* womenswear and furnishings retailer to explore literary traditions behind the styling of fashion collections.

Harris has given 45 **public lectures** in the assessment period. These have ranged from the major literary festivals (Hay, Cheltenham, Oxford, Edinburgh) to small events in village halls (as at Wantage and Malmesbury). Harris has also led sessions with **specialised groups**, such as the Virginia Woolf Society, The Betjeman Society, and The T.S. Eliot Society. In this way she has engaged with a total of c.10,000 members of the public, many of whom have written to say that they are reading more widely as a direct result of Harris's lectures. Many of the lectures included specially-prepared material on the place in which the lecture was being given, making a specific bond between the body of research presented and the local knowledge of the audience.

Harris's research and impact has primarily been aimed at British audiences, but she has nonetheless achieved **international reach**. Translation rights for *VW* have been sold in Croatia and the Czech Republic, with much interest from elsewhere, especially Spain and South America. In North America press coverage has been enthusiastic and the academic response warm (eg. in the invitation to give a plenary address in Canada). International interest in *Romantic Moderns* has been especially exciting because British art has a lamentably low profile abroad. Features in the foreign press (eg. *Australian Book Review*, *Washington Post*, *Radio Europe*) suggest receptive audiences around the world and the potential for further engagement.

In June 2011 Harris was selected as a **New Generation Thinker** (funded by the AHRC and BBC Radio 3). Since then, as a regular contributor to Radio 3, she has drawn on her research to participate in high-profile public debates about British culture and tradition. Speaking alongside

Impact case study (REF3b)

National Trust director Fiona Reynolds in a *Nightwaves* special (April 2012), she urged the vital importance of literary history in understanding attitudes to landscape and, in a programme on the 'well-being agenda' and its policy implications (September 2012), she brought insights from fiction to bear on a debate otherwise dominated by economists. Harris's radio essays have featured on Radio 4's *Pick of the Week* and her broadcasting is showcased in the AHRC's [2013 Impact Report](#).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. [Harris's website](#) provides details of public talks since 2010, links to BBC iPlayer for her radio programmes, links to newspaper websites for her journalism, and several profiles of Harris's work. Listings on the 'Events' pages give evidence of the number and variety of festivals, galleries and groups who have invited Harris to give public talks. Listings and iPlayer links on the 'Radio' pages provide evidence of her regular contributions to Radio 3. The Website Administrator can be contacted to confirm [statistics](#) for the traffic to Harris's website.
2. [Files of press cuttings](#): Harris has personal files of press cuttings which corroborate all press quotations in the statement above, demonstrate the extent of media interest in Harris's books, and show how *Romantic Moderns* has been connected with rising interest in both British Art and broader questions about national identity. Similar files are also kept by Thames & Hudson.
3. [Files of correspondence from readers](#), kept by Harris: Many hundreds of letters/e-mails from readers, evidencing the diverse ways in which the research has enriched their reading and thinking.
4. Former *Nightwaves* producer at BBC Radio 3 and organiser of the AHRC New Generation Thinkers scheme 2011, can be contacted to corroborate details of Harris's work for radio, and comment on its originality and effectiveness in bringing academic research to general listeners. She can attest to Harris's commitment to the AHRC/BBC New Generation Thinkers scheme.
5. Publicist for Thames & Hudson, can be contacted to attest to the scale of interest from the press, the size, range and enthusiasm of literary festival audiences, and the degree to which Harris has been able to pose challenging questions of aesthetics in large public forums.
6. The Head of Collections at Pallant House Gallery, who is active and influential in the British art world, can be contacted to corroborate on the influence of Harris's work on curators looking to showcase modern British painting, and on members of the public whose understanding of British art has been deepened by reading *Romantic Moderns* and attending Harris's lectures.
7. Former Learning and Events Manager, National Portrait Gallery, can be contacted to attest to Harris's commitment and rigour in giving public talks that bring current research to bear on aspects of the National Portrait Gallery collections.