

Timothy O. Benson, ed. *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002.

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Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds. *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002.

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The aim of these two companion volumes is nothing less than a redrawing of the map of European modernism. The first title presents a collection of historical and interpretive essays on the various artistic avant-gardes of interwar Central Europe, and the second provides an enormous selection of primary documents—manifestoes, essays, review articles—translated from avant-garde journals and publications that originally appeared in a wide range of languages. By revealing the diversity and richness of these “other” avant-gardes, and by initiating (or at least deepening) scholarly discussion of the particular features and significance of these movements, these volumes offer a wealth of material that should advance critical examination of the standard narratives of European modernism, which have so often taken Western European (particularly French) developments as canonical.

The implicit motivation for such a project is the re-emergence of a recognizable Central European “cultural space” after the end of the geographical and ideological divisions of the Cold War. While this cultural space encompassed a long and complex history of interactions and tensions, it effectively ceased to exist for over four decades

following World War II. Thus some of the juxtapositions that occur in these volumes can initially seem surprising: movements that have played prominent roles in familiar accounts of modernism, such as the Bauhaus, are brought into connection with much more obscure movements such as *Bunt* (“Revolt,” based in Poznań), *Zenit* (“Zenith,” based in Zagreb and, later, in Belgrade), or *Jung Idysz* (“Young Yiddish,” based in Łódź). Eminent emigrés such as Tristan Tzara or László Moholy-Nagy, usually associated with the Paris or Berlin avant-gardes, also appear in the context of little known Romanian or Hungarian movements. That such juxtapositions can appear surprising is evidence of how extensively post-war political geographies have influenced our histories of European modernism, and of how valuable a function these volumes can serve.

The essays contained in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* do an admirable job of conveying both the remarkable diversity as well as the characteristic features of avant-garde production in the region. The volume alternates between two types of essay: the shorter “city portraits” that structure the book as a whole, and the more in-depth historical or analytic essays that are grouped according to the city to which they most directly pertain. This topographical ordering of material by cities as opposed to chronology, national traditions or theoretical themes works well and reflects issues that are discussed explicitly in many of the essays in the volume. Clearly, the whole issue of hegemonic national traditions is problematic in a region where borders have shifted with remarkable regularity and various social, ethnic and linguistic groups were long subject to larger imperial structures. Focusing the discussions around particular urban centers effectively portrays them as “exchange sites” encompassing multiple traditions that could be and were actualized in different forms at

different times. It also reflects the inner complexity of many of the Central European nations that emerged after World War I: Poznań, Warsaw, and Cracow, for example, while all major cities of the independent Polish state resurrected after the war, still bore the historical and cultural traces of their previous partition among the Hohenzollern, Romanov, and Habsburg empires. The cities featured in independent “portrait” essays are Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Weimar, Dessau, Bucharest, Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Poznań, Cracow, Warsaw, and Łódź. One can of course complain of important cultural centers that have been missed—Brno, with its groundbreaking functionalist architects, is sorely absent—but the volume wisely makes no pretence to encyclopedic exhaustiveness, rather aiming for and delivering a fascinating assemblage of particular case studies.

The task of articulating common features among these diverse cases falls to the longer interpretive essays. Despite differences in style and method, a common theme soon emerges: how does the widespread notion of an international, universalist avant-garde (radiating from the epicenter of Paris, perhaps with secondary sources in Berlin and Moscow) relate to these diverse Central European movements, which often combined advanced modernist technique with regional traditions or concerns? The contributors are in agreement that one cannot regard these hybrid avant-garde idioms merely as impure versions of movements that had their unadulterated or true expression in Paris or Moscow. The essays therefore consistently raise questions of center versus periphery, of universal versus particular, and international versus local or traditional—questions that go to the heart of what is generally understood as the avant-garde.

The historical ramifications of these issues are formulated clearly in Timothy O. Benson's contribution near the beginning of the volume. Benson portrays the emergence of the new Central European nations after the war as a dialectical dilemma for the European avant-garde: the existence of allied movements in all these new nations may have demonstrated the international scope of the avant-garde, but the diversity of new aesthetic idioms could also appear to undermine the ideology of a united front of avant-garde artists. Plurality could thus appear as both universalizing *and* fragmenting. Stephen A. Mansbach's contribution in effect extends this dilemma to reigning art historical accounts of the European avant-garde. Mansbach argues most pointedly against the Parisian bias of the narrative of avant-garde art canonized in institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art. The avant-gardes of "Eastern Europe" (a term Mansbach retains somewhat apologetically, and which clearly goes against the revisionist geography underlying the conception of the volume) "depart from the mandate of Western absolutism by encouraging diverse formal expression, but they also sanctioned levels of reference abjured in the West as inappropriately individual, national, or extra-aesthetic" (295). Mansbach argues that we need to revise our conception of modernism so as to accept the incorporation of a variety of apparently anti-modernist techniques—such as folkloric themes and traditional motifs—as a legitimate feature in the history of modernism. Similarly, Derek Sayer's exploration of the ironies underlying the mutual fascination between Czech and French Surrealists also argues that "recourse to 'elemental visual vocabularies' does not—necessarily—imply 'transcendence of national boundaries' or hostility to 'the forces of traditionalism or nationalism,' in Central Europe or anywhere else" (94); Sayer, however, is much more skeptical as to whether this

blurring is something to be celebrated. Indeed, the omnipresence of nationalism—with its potential for both liberalism and atavism—as a background to the cultural production of the region informs the two essays that most clearly diverge from the art historical tone of the volume: Péter Nádas’s rhapsodic essay on the sense of rootedness in traditional Hungarian culture, and Anthony D. Smith’s useful scholarly overview of theories of nationalism and its relation to modernity. Taken together, the interpretive essays do not so much present conclusions as to how one should interpret these Central European avant-gardes as provide stimulating questions for further research.

Those wishing to pursue such research will find *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930* an invaluable resource. The over seven hundred pages of primary documents it translates provide a panoramic view of the cultural and aesthetic trends of the region—a view that few readers are likely to command otherwise. The volume is structured into topical sections on themes such as “national traditions” (including documents that pre-date the avant-garde as such but demonstrate the aesthetic obsession with national particularity), the “activation of the avant-garde,” and “form as agent of social change,” or on major movements such as Dada, International Constructivism, and the Bauhaus. Within each section documents are subdivided by city (echoing the structure of the *Central European Avant-Gardes* essay volume and allowing one to locate groups of documents discussed there), or occasionally around an avant-garde movement centered in a particular city. Brief introductions provide context for each subsection. This structure neatly provides an account that is both diachronic and synchronic in sweep.

What emerges, again, is an image of both diversity and consistency. The reader can both reconstruct (at least partially) particular local dialogues on issues such as, say, formalism, and can also trace influences and interactions between regional centers. Among the most fascinating document clusters are those covering well-known events, such as the 1922 Congress of International Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf, but then mapping the repercussions of such events within lesser-known Central European avant-garde groups. The sourcebook thus does not present an eclectic mosaic but rather recovers an interlocking web of debates. Therein lies its enormous usefulness. It has, for example, up to now been difficult if not impossible to teach a course that would consider the avant-gardes of Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Romania, and Yugoslavia as interrelated movements, simply due to the large number of languages involved and the paucity of translations. One hopes the wealth of material the *Between Worlds* sourcebook provides will motivate teachers to design courses integrating these Central European movements into the wider discourse on modernism.

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