

Tendentious Modernism: Karel Teige's Path to Functionalism
By Peter Zusi

The category of tendentiousness sits uncomfortably within most accounts of twentieth-century European esthetics. With its dogmatic, didactic, and aesthetically conservative inclinations, tendentiousness as a concept appears to have resisted rather than contributed to the triumphant development of high modernism. The opposition would seem inherent to the constitutive logic of modernism, which translates the ideal of political revolt to the realm of artistic form. Such translation was often understood as inseparable from political aims (for example in fascist and especially in left-wing avant-gardes between the wars), but the esthetic moment of formal innovation always remained fundamental. Tendentiousness, on the contrary, demands broad comprehensibility and is thus fundamentally at odds with the criterion of formal experimentation. Indeed, by de-emphasizing the esthetic and encouraging a reductively political discourse, tendentiousness (as a matter of historical record) placed literature and art ominously under the authority of self-interested diktat and played a pivotal role in the anti-modernist cultural politics of twentieth-century totalitarianism. The category thus appears at once persistent and peripheral, attesting to the enormous pressures applied to cultural discourses under the emerging catastrophes of the 1930s and 40s.¹

Antagonism between the ideals of esthetic experimentation and political tendentiousness constitutes a macro-narrative of the major European modernist traditions. This is the unhappy consciousness of so much early to mid-twentieth-century modernist thought: Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism, and Critical Theory (to name only the most familiar examples on the Left) all argued for the unity of the “two avant-gardes,” for a

parallel between esthetics and politics—and all met the unflinching skepticism of those demanding a clear, unambiguously expressed political message from art.²

But is this opposition as absolute as it seems? Was the conceptual divide unbridgeable between those who claimed compatibility between esthetic and political revolution and those who denied it? Examining this issue through the micro-narrative of less familiar cultural discourses might open up a fresh perspective, and the Czech example is particularly intriguing here. For within the context of modern Czech cultural history, twentieth-century tendentiousness could easily appear linked to circumstances emerging from the early nineteenth-century Czech National Revival: to the predisposition to judge cultural phenomena in terms of their efficacy or “functionality” for the realization of national aspirations. In Alexej Kusák’s formulation, during the period stretching from the early National Revival through the Biedermeier era “Czech culture took on a value system that placed functional value [*funkční hodnota*] above immanent value. The criterion for evaluation thus could not be the greatness or originality of a cultural act [...] but rather its utility, its usefulness in the political struggle of the nation. This functionality then [...] also became a criterion for the ethical value of a work.”³ The accentuation of political over esthetic criteria might easily appear as the mark of cultural belatedness: two centuries of Habsburg domination burdened Czech cultural discourse with a reductively political agenda. For example, the acrimonious, decades-long debates over the allegedly ancient but in fact forged *Královédvorský* and *Zelenohorský* manuscripts (widely invoked in the nineteenth century as “proof” that the Czech literary tradition was older than the German and therefore possessed cultural legitimacy), or Jan Kollár’s (1793-1852) conception in *Slávy dcera* (1824) of the poet as teacher educating

his nation about its past accomplishments and sufferings, reveal how central a role political and didactic considerations played in nineteenth-century Czech and Slovak culture.⁴ Projecting forward, this trend has been seen as merging into the macro-narrative described above and as anticipating the utilitarian political conception of literature that characterized much of orthodox Czech Marxist literary criticism from the 1920s onward. Kusák, for example, discussing leftist Czechoslovak culture in the interwar period, writes: “the Czech variants of many of the later slogans of popular character [*lidovostí*], comprehensibility, engagement, party character [*straničností*], etc. have their roots precisely here in the *Vormärz* or Biedermeier period.”⁵ The type of rhetoric Kusák has in mind here was solidly established by the early 1920s, when one of the most prominent left-wing Czech poets could write: “A poem is not a slogan, but if our proletarian poems cannot be as simple, clear, and effective as our slogans, then to the devil with all poetry, to the devil with all art, and let us become good orators for the proletariat rather than good poets for the petite bourgeoisie [...].”⁶ Thus, while this sort of orthodox Marxist cultural discourse achieved broad currency in interwar Europe, in Czechoslovakia its reception was—arguably—amplified by local circumstances: belatedness begot dogmatism through the shared resistance against the cultural currents that ultimately gave rise to modernism.

Nonetheless, it is striking that several of the most significant Czech contributions to the interwar European discourse on modernism involve the insistent exploration of the categories of *function* and *functionalism*. The typology of functions elaborated by Jan Mukařovský and Prague School structuralism stands out in this regard, as do the signal achievements of Czech functionalist architecture.⁷ Indeed, these discourses were

intertwined and mutually reinforcing: Karel Teige's theoretical texts on Constructivism, for example, represent an important point of contact between Prague structuralism and Czech modernist architecture or the avant-garde in general.⁸ Clearly, this emphasis on functions is not unique to the Czech avant-garde and to a large extent reflects modernist trends developing elsewhere, particularly in France, Germany, Holland, and (somewhat later) the Soviet Union. Yet perhaps nowhere else did theoretical reflection on the concept of functionalism link such a wide range of significant cultural discourses, from architecture to general esthetics to economic theory. So the question arises: why should these developments have found such an enthusiastic reception and fruitful elaboration in interwar Czechoslovakia?

The post-National Revival discourse of cultural tendentiousness mentioned above naturally presents itself in this context. To be sure, tendentiousness does not have precisely the same meaning or function in the nineteenth century that it later took on in the twentieth. Yet the early exaggeration of the political function of culture could plausibly have produced heightened sensitivity to the variety of functions culture could serve and ultimately have led to exploration of the specifically esthetic function—a hallmark of Czech modernist esthetics. One detects this already in the culture of the Czech fin-se-siècle. Literary and art journals such as *Moderní revue* (from 1894) and *Volné směry* (from 1896), for example, are primarily remembered for opening Czech culture up to broader European movements such as Symbolism, Decadence, and the Secession and for helping to liberate Czech cultural discourse from subordination to political criteria; in this respect the Czech fin-se-siècle represents a crucial break with Revivalist rhetoric and anticipates the avant-garde of the interwar period.⁹ Moreover, the

critic František Xaver Šalda (1865-1937), an editor of *Volné směry* in the early 1900s, is one of the first figures in Czech culture to link modernist culture as a whole with the early functionalist or “constructive” rationalism of figures such as H. P. Berlage, Hermann Muthesius, and Otto Wagner. Nonetheless, Šalda did not argue for this modernist approach to architecture and culture purely on esthetic grounds. At the end of his glowing review of Berlage’s *Grundlagen und Entwicklung der Architektur*, for example, Šalda lashed out at the developers of the Prague Municipal House (1903-1912), an architectural monument of the Czech Secession, which, Šalda maintained, merely continued in the whimsical and willful decorativism of Czech historicism: “If only a thousand people were to understand that this concerns the very spiritual health of the nation, then I maintain they would confound the municipal politics that has dirtied itself with such an artistic vulgarity as the so-called Representational House [i.e., the Municipal House]: not for a day would they contend with anyone who was complicit in this national and artistic embarrassment.”¹⁰ In the early 1900s, therefore, Šalda still couched his defense of international modernism in a didactic argument: modernism would bring cultural maturity to the Czech nation. Functionalism as esthetic principle was desirable not only for its promise to create a coherent modern culture but also for its function in creating a cosmopolitan, and therefore “healthy,” national culture.¹¹

Paradoxically, then, the rigorously modernist concept of functionalism just may have found such fertile ground in Czechoslovakia for reasons generally regarded as regressive. If such claim is plausible, then clearly one would have to revise the easy, bipolar scheme whereby the National Revival legacy of national tendentiousness anticipated only the anti-modernist currents in interwar Czech culture. More broadly,

however, such an affinity would suggest that the macro-narrative of tendentiousness as an “anti-esthetic” antagonistic to the radical and cosmopolitan character of modernism and the avant-garde conceals greater complexities than first appears.

The figure of Karel Teige (1900-1951), the most influential propagator of avant-garde culture in interwar Czechoslovakia, represents a fascinating case study in this context. Teige, who during the 1920s was the major theorist and spokesperson for Devětsil, the most important grouping of Czech avant-garde artists and writers, was an avant-gardist of impeccable credentials and European stature.¹² A vehement Marxist and the major theoretician of Czech Constructivism, Poetism, and Surrealism, Teige’s views were often too radical even for his avant-gardist colleagues.¹³ Teige routinely formulated his exuberant defense of modernism as a rejection of nineteenth-century historicism and “academicism,” which he explicitly linked with the didactic and nationalist strain in Czech culture. Finally, while Teige regarded himself as a loyal propagator of communism and defender of Soviet policy—capable at times of resorting to disturbingly reductive and dogmatic arguments¹⁴—his prominence as spokesman for the Czech avant-garde more often brought him into sharp conflict on the Left with proponents of tendentious art, specifically the Czech versions of Proletkult and, later, Socialist Realism. As a result, after the Communist takeover in 1948 Teige was targeted for vicious criticism as the embodiment of “decadent formalism.”¹⁵ The radicalism and consistency of Teige’s modernist views would make it surprising, at the least, to identify in his understanding of international functionalism any traces of the cultural legacy he so vociferously rejected: that of nineteenth-century Czech national tendentiousness.

Nonetheless, traces are there. One of the striking features of the brief, early period (from early 1921 until mid-1922) in which Teige attempted to articulate theoretical principles for the “proletarian art” being practiced by *Devětsil* was the speed with which Teige soon abandoned most of those principles. “Proletarian art” had much in common with the ideals of Proletkult: it initially flourished under the sponsorship of Stanislav Kostka Neumann (whose journals *Kmen* and *Proletkult* were most responsible for translating Soviet Proletkult into the Czech context) and argued in favor of art that was both politically tendentious and widely comprehensible. Over the course of roughly one year, however, Teige and *Devětsil* shifted to a platform that lay firmly within the mainstream of the contemporary European avant-garde, as was expressed by their adoption of Constructivism and, shortly thereafter, their elaboration of Poetism as twin theoretical banners.¹⁶ In many respects, this rapid shift from proletarian art to the Constructivism/Poetism dualism appears as a complete reversal: a move away from a regressive cultural position (which later evolved into the strident anti-modernism of a figure such as Neumann) towards a progressive avant-gardism (which became the target of orthodox Marxist critique especially from the 1930s onward). But commentators have noted that the shift between these early positions never took the form of an open break.¹⁷ While Teige’s fiercely avant-gardist positions from the mid-1920s through the 1930s have been the subject of increasing interest in recent years, this curious early development has attracted almost no attention in the English-language scholarship.¹⁸ What follows will examine the logic that guided Teige during that early shift from proletarian art to the avant-gardist positions adopted in 1922, focusing on the key terms of *lidovost* (“popular character”) and *tendence* (“tendentiousness” or “tendency”). My

claim is that Teige did not simply turn with the winds of theoretical fashion, as so many of his detractors in interwar Czechoslovakia liked to believe. His logic reveals smooth evolution rather than radical reversal: concepts that commonly count as esthetically regressive led Teige to some of his most rigorously modernist positions.

The point of this examination, it must be emphasized, is not to suggest that Teige was “secretly” regressive or that Czech modernism ineluctably bears traces of cultural provincialism. Rather, the point is to show the complexity and flexibility of conceptual oppositions that are all too often conceived as static. Within the Czech literary historical context, the relation between tendentiousness and modernist functionalism confutes the overly schematic association of later Czech Socialist Realism with the “utilitarian” legacy of the National Revival. But more broadly, Teige’s early development reveals crucial contact points between modernism and conceptual trends generally deemed antagonistic to modernism. The micro-narrative of the Czech case thus follows a less trodden path through the conceptual topography of modernism: this by-road takes shortcuts and follows detours that the macro-narrative conceals. Mapping this alternate route results in a better appreciation of how modernism—even the strident subset known as the historical avant-garde—proved receptive to and able to appropriate seemingly hostile concepts to its own ends.¹⁹

I. Spontaneous Responses: *Lidovost* and Mass Culture

In the context of Teige’s early articulation of proletarian art, the first key term, *lidovost*, subsumed a particularly wide range of semantic associations. In the usual and most immediate sense it meant literally “folkness” and conjured images of traditional peasant

and folk art. In this sense the term evoked the rhetoric of Romanticism—in the Czech lands often intertwined with Herder-inspired notions of a unique national or folk “genius”—and had played a major role in the wake of the National Revival as a designation for what was widely perceived as the “truly” Czech culture of the heartland, as opposed to the high culture of the Germanized Bohemian aristocracy and bourgeoisie.²⁰ Even in very early texts, however, Teige subjected this traditional understanding of *lidovost* to sarcastic critique. He wrote:

Folk art [*lidové umění*]? Ah, yes, our glorious national costumes, which we say the whole world should envy! The regional costumes of Moravia and *Slovácko*, reveling in reds and a multitude of colors, the essential yield of the artistic labors of the Czechoslovak people! What a feast for the eyes to see national and Slavic flags unfurled and garnishing the facades of tall buildings, otherwise gray and sullen. And at every festive opportunity the wide avenues overflow with gallant lads and fine lasses, for it is customary to display the national consciousness and Hussite nature of our tribe by donning *slovácký* national dress!”²¹

In contrast to the nostalgic or romanticizing image of *lidovost* he mocks here, Teige wished to use recuperate the term for a different use. He wished it to designate not “folk art” but rather “popular character,” and to connote wide popular appeal and intimate connection with “the people,” which Teige identified not with the peasantry but rather with the proletariat: “By ‘popular character’ [*lidovostí*] we do not mean national specificity, ethnography, etc. There is just *one* people [*lid*] from pole to pole: the *modern proletariat*.”²² Thus, while Teige claimed that the *lidovost* of proletarian art would result in a new strain of folk art (*lidové umění*), he certainly did not intend this as a call to imitate traditional folk art. Rather, traditional folk art was to function as an analogy or ideal for art as an integral component of everyday life. The essence of *lidovost* for Teige

did not consist in any specific aesthetic forms or practices: traditional folk art presented not a pattern for contemporary artists but rather an ideal that could inform an original response to a new historical situation.

In his vision of a new folk art that would be urban rather than rural, and modern rather than traditional, Teige was inspired by a small volume of meditative essays by the painter and author Josef Čapek (1888-1944), titled *Nejskromější umění* (*The Humblest Art*).²³ This eclectic collection constitutes a remarkable though little-known document in the history of modern art; its influence on the Czech interwar avant-garde deserves particular emphasis.²⁴ Čapek focuses his attention on the peripheries of artistic activity: on painted signs over shop doors, on wooden children's toys, on outmoded furniture, on family bric-a-brac, and on the aesthetics of old photographs as well as modern American cinema. These objects share failure: they do not meet either traditionalist or modernist definitions of art. Rather than embodying eternal ideals or boisterously challenging convention, they humbly subsist on the border of Kitsch, suffering derision while offering delight. At times Čapek's observations have a Benjaminian ring (such as in his reflections on the unique aura of mid-19th-century portrait photography or his obsessive fascination with the odd fragment of material culture washed up from the past), while at other moments he sounds almost Heideggerian, such as in his description of entering a darkened kitchen late in the evening:

Things that a moment ago were engulfed in darkness and hidden from your eyes now begin to exist: white tiled surfaces and the black iron plates of the oven start to take outline in their mutual oppositions, and this occurs without lights, without gradations of shade or reflections; that intimately familiar old oven pushes through the soft darkness, extending and rising up with an almost gentle certainty; and now

these things finally *are*, they are here, living in their full dimensions with all of their being.²⁵

Humble objects captivate Čapek because they confront one with sheer being, and this intimate experience of materiality would be impossible with “art” objects that were not part of everyday life.²⁶ Čapek’s most humble art was thus hardly unobtrusive. Rather it represented a fundamental point of contact with the world: mundanity made miraculous.

Teige took two main points from Čapek. The first was Čapek’s dissociation of *lidovost* from any specific heritage of rural folk art. Of the range of everyday objects Čapek discussed Teige was most interested in those that came from urban experience and that represented specifically modern phenomena: first and foremost, cinema. The second point was Čapek’s implicit transformation of the term *lidovost* from a description of a genre or formal category to a form of perception. Čapek was not so much interested in what the artist or craftsman intended as in the impression the object made, the way it shaped the everyday world. Teige, again, emphasized a particular form of perception he deemed crucial for the urban proletariat: enjoyment and laughter. *Lidovost*, he wrote, “requires comprehensibility and amusement value [srozumitelnost a zábavnost].”²⁷

Laughter was the sign of a positive connection between the proletariat and the otherwise so threatening everyday world. Further, the spontaneity of laughter represented a guarantee of truthfulness: when large numbers of people responded to something with laughter, this was a force to be taken seriously. Thus Teige’s twist on Čapek’s ideas identified *lidovost* with a particular response provoked: art that was *lidové* would be spontaneously comprehensible and attractive to the broad masses.

Precisely this criterion made Teige in 1921 and early 1922 openly suspicious of most avant-garde experimentation and modernist innovation. The formal complexity of avant-garde works was an obstacle to broad reception: he noted critically, for example, that Picasso, Braque, and Verlaine were not truly “popular” (*lidové*), and that Alexander Blok’s works could not approach the readership enjoyed by the anonymous authors of Buffalo Bill novels.²⁸ Further, Teige was convinced that the horrors of the World War had utterly discredited anything that even resembled fetishism of technology and progress. Italian Futurism, with its glorification of “war [...] as the only hygiene for the world” represented an obvious target in this respect, but Teige also criticized the affirmative “technological megalomania” of Czech Civilism as well as the “machinism” he felt characterized much of the Soviet avant-garde.²⁹ Finally, Teige at this stage was quick to characterize practically all of the previous avant-garde movements as agonies of the late bourgeois epoch rather than any sort of cultural rebirth. Thus, Expressionism and Dada represented for him (much as they would later for Georg Lukács) the “final consequences of the bankruptcy of the previous art,” raising to an even higher power the chaotic swirl of cultural confusion that typified art of the bourgeois era and that proletarian culture was to overcome.³⁰ Indeed, Teige’s earliest texts at times struck an outright anti-modernist note: he complained, for example, that the “old art” (by which he meant practically the entire European avant-garde to that time) was bad because it was too much like modern cities, “which we also don’t like. For they are simply chaotic and spineless, aimless conglomerations of individual energies, [...] quantity but not wealth.”³¹

These early suspicions towards much of the avant-garde and anything resembling a machine cult were the flip side of Teige's recurring claim that the new art was intrinsically "humanist." Teige claimed that "only a human being can form the content (by no means the object!) of a work of art," and he contrasted this orientation with the machine fetishism that, he felt, had led Léger to proclaim the machine gun as an ideal art object.³² Precisely what this humanism entailed was not very clear. But it related semantically back to the category of *lidovost*, a relation that could appear etymological as well, since the Czech term *lid*, meaning a people or the folk, also forms the root of such words as *lidstvo* and *lidskost*, denoting humankind in general and the quality of humanity or humaneness.³³

Teige revised most of these anti-avant-gardist positions fundamentally within a few years (in some cases within a few months). Nonetheless, these statements cannot be discounted simply as expressions of an immature or passing phase. For it is the transformation (or even, in some cases, retention within a new context) of these claims that is striking within Teige's development away from the paradigm of proletarian art over the course of 1922 and 1923. His concept of humanism reflects this clearly: while in the earliest texts this had grounded Teige's antagonism to any artistic orientation that took the machine or technological progress as inspiration, Teige retained this vocabulary of humanism even after he had become a fervent proponent of Constructivism (and thus also of the aesthetic primacy of technological production). Teige presented Constructivism as a practice by which humankind could regain control over technology, to which, he claimed, it had fallen into servitude. Teige wrote: "the machine was created by humankind, but now the machine shapes [*utváří*] and even rules over humanity"; thus

it was the task of the avant-garde to turn this relation back the right way around.³⁴ From an early point, then, Teige's understanding of Constructivism as the humanization of technology was infused with several of the themes of classical Marxist humanism that would gain such prominence with the publication of Marx's *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts* at the end of the decade.³⁵ Nor did this humanist vocabulary disappear after Teige had become (in)famous as one of the most stringent theoreticians of functionalism. As late as 1928 Teige could write that "Constructivism proclaims man [*člověka*] as the stylistic principle of architecture."³⁶

Perhaps most crucial, however, was how Teige's early commitment to *lidovost* translated in the early to mid-twenties into a fascination with mass culture.³⁷ Teige early on identified the purist forms of *lidovost* in:

westerns, Buffalo Bills, Nick Carter novels, sentimental novels, American movie serials or Chaplin's grotesques, amateur comedy theater, variété jugglers, wandering minstrels, clowns and acrobatic circus riders, Springtime folk celebrations, a Sunday football match, in short almost everything on which the cultural life of the vast majority of the proletariat thrives. These literary forms—many of you will say: deformities—are nowadays the one and most characteristic popular [*lidovou*] literature.³⁸

The link between these disparate examples of popular culture was their proven ability to entertain masses of people (i.e., their *zábavnost*). Again, Teige viewed the essence of *lidovost* in the capacity to evoke a particular positive response. For this reason he felt that proletarian art must not simply depict the world in which the proletariat lived or attempt to mythologize or aestheticize factories, housing projects, union leaders, and so on. Rather, proletarian art had to be an art to which the proletariat spontaneously responded: "not stories of life's miseries, not paintings of mine shafts and steelworks, but

of the tropics and of far-away lands, poetry of a free and active life, which brings to the worker not a reality that crushes but rather a reality and a vision that inspire and strengthen!”³⁹ The proletariat was to act as the consumer or audience rather than the object or topic of proletarian art. Mass culture would in this way reinforce the construction of a working-class subjectivity.

The danger of producing mere escapist art was a danger of which Teige was aware, even if at this stage he did not have a sufficient response to it. Truly escapist art, for Teige, was always bourgeois or traditionalist art, which required its viewers to escape to a museum, gallery, or church in order to view it. The justification for turning to mass and popular forms, with their exoticism and potential escapism, was simply the indisputable fact that “the people” responded to it: only in this way could one let the proletariat dictate the terms of its own art. This criterion of spontaneous response, Teige felt, guaranteed that the new proletarian art would not be simply frivolous but rather that it hit a nerve and touched on something truly modern. Thus Teige increasingly emphasized the criterion that the new art be entertaining and engrossing, that its primary goal be to make its spectators *happy*. This is a fundamental point of contact between Teige’s understanding of proletarian art and the later “felicology” of poetism.⁴⁰

The association of *lidovost* with what I have termed a criterion of spontaneous response reveals how smoothly Teige shifted between the discourses of the Proletkult and the avant-garde. The criterion of spontaneity emerged from the category of comprehensibility (*srozumitelnost*) and the anti-élitism or even anti-intellectualism inherent in the demand that art and literature take their inspiration from working class culture. In this regard the early Teige remained well within the orbit of Proletkult

doctrine. Simultaneously, however, by presenting mass culture as paradigmatic for the spontaneous response that allegedly ensured art's deeper rootedness in society, Teige identified that response with the achievement of a direct (even organic) integration of art and modern life. Clearly, this association of proletarian art with mass culture came at the expense of traditional notions of artistic value. Teige's formulations thus implicitly posit the "negation of autonomous art" and the "reuniting of art and life" commonly regarded as fundamental to the historical avant-garde movements.⁴¹ Neumann immediately sensed the implications of Teige's shift, and some of his earliest polemics with Teige concerned precisely the latter's understanding of *lidovost*.⁴² The Czech doctrine of proletarian art, therefore, represents a common ideological source from which branched two cultural currents—the avant-gardism of a figure like Teige and the anti-modernism of a figure like Neumann—that would become ever more bitterly opposed.⁴³

II. The Efficacy of Art: *Tendence* and Functionalism

The second key term in Teige's early writings, *tendence*, underwent a swift and surprising evolution. For Teige—the later proponent of a radical elimination of didactic tendency if not narrative content as such—began his theoretical career as an earnest defender of tendentiousness. The early manifesto "Proletářské umění," which Teige co-wrote with one of the major voices of the proletarian art movement, the poet Jiří Wolker (see note 15), makes this clear: "Every art conscious of its task has been tendentious. Proletarian art is more tendentious than others, since it is more conscious of its task and expresses itself concretely."⁴⁴ Teige and Wolker even quote at length a statement on tendentiousness in art by the poet and political journalist Karel Havlíček Borovský (1821-

1856), thus explicitly alluding to the post-Biedermeier-era legacy of cultural politicization.⁴⁵ The further evolution of Teige's understanding of *tendence*, however, reveals clearly how the early Teige could exploit and emphasize the logical tensions within a concept in order to end up in a position that appears diametrically opposed.

A key text in this evolution is the 1922 essay “Nové umění proletářské,” (“The New Proletarian Art”), which represents Teige's first major attempt to redefine the concepts set forth in “Proletářské umění” and thus stands halfway between the doctrine of proletarian art and Constructivism. Teige here retains *tendence* as a critical category, claiming that, in contrast to the “artistic bankruptcy” of Futurism and other recent avant-garde movements, the most current art is characterized by “*tendentiousness and collectivity*.”⁴⁶ But he also begins to distinguish between the “usual understanding” and his own concept of *tendence*. The citation from Havlíček Borovský returns once again and serves Teige as a foil against which the “pseudovalues” of such nineteenth-century Czech and Slovak patriotic writers as Kollár, František Ladislav Čelakovský (1799-1852), and Josef Kajetán Tyl (1808-1856) are revealed as empty. Havlíček Borovský's demand that tendentious poetry “*must above all truly be POETRY, because bad poetry with the finest tendentiousness will never be tendentious poetry*,” serves as Teige's model for denouncing “the common tendentious pseudopoetry of today.”⁴⁷ The origin of such tendentious pseudopoetry, Teige argued, lay in a historical misunderstanding and a failure to distinguish between two forms of tendentiousness. The first form, tendentiousness as commonly understood—that is, literature that functioned as party propaganda, “bearing the stamp of party bureaucracy and inspired from above”—was in fact only a subgenre of tendentious art and represented the artistic style appropriate to

meet the specific demands made on art during openly revolutionary periods.⁴⁸ To raise such a narrow understanding of tendentiousness to the level of a fundamental criterion for art at all times, as Teige now accused the Proletkult of doing, was an error.

The second, broader form of tendentiousness upheld not art's obligation to communicate particular information or viewpoints but rather its fundamental obligation to seek social relevance and effective forms of engagement. This form of tendentiousness represented a cogent response to the claim that the highest criterion for art, and the first prerequisite for the artist, was absolute freedom. For Teige, the absolute freedom of the bourgeois artist—ultimately culminating in the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, or an art answerable to nothing outside of itself—was not a form of liberation or privileged access to hidden truths. Rather, he felt it represented banishment, loneliness, and delusion. The doctrine of absolute artistic freedom was deluding because it substituted contingent individual beliefs for binding collective truth. Teige thus linked the proper form of tendentiousness to the need to overcome the aesthetic chaos of the present (the result of competition between the incompatible artistic visions of individual artists) and to identify artistic principles that could serve as a foundation for a unified, communal cultural paradigm. To those who objected that tendentiousness resulted in the loss of art's freedom and its bondage to extra-artistic principles, Teige responded that not all forms of freedom were desirable. The aesthetic liberation he associated with the October Revolution was certainly not the negative freedom so dear to the bourgeois artist, which by striving to remove all obstacles ended in a complete lack of commitment: "The absolute freedom of art has been a most precious principle for many artists. Many artists and aestheticians have considered art to endure outside of life and its temporal order,

unhindered by political and moral laws; art floating in a vacuum of boundless freedom, was unable to anchor itself securely in concrete life.”⁴⁹ Teige argued that the positive liberation enacted by the October Revolution, on the other hand, released art and culture into areas from which they had previously been banished and brought them back into contact with society as a whole: “The cultural activity of the Russian Revolution begins with the realization that *the reciprocal dependence and connection of art and life* liberates artistic practice in that it once again binds it to a social calling.”⁵⁰ Thus the criterion of social engagement or political commitment—that is, tendentiousness—represented for Teige not a form of bondage or loss of freedom but rather a liberation from the confines of the merely individual truths in which bourgeois artists remained trapped by their negative concept of freedom.

As with the category of *lidovost*, therefore, Teige’s understanding of *tendence* grew out of Proletkult doctrine but simultaneously opened up a distinctly avant-gardist perspective through its emphasis on the “*reciprocal dependence and connection of art and life*.” The social engagement of art was translated into the reunion of art and everyday life; tendentiousness functioned as a codeword for overcoming art’s autonomy.

But this early usage of *tendence* exerted a more specific influence on Teige’s shift to an avant-garde program as well—an influence that would have far-reaching consequences. By focusing attention on the manner in which art operates, and on the criteria for judging art’s relevance or effectiveness, the concept of *tendence* led Teige towards what soon became for him a fundamental theoretical concern: art as *function*.⁵¹ Teige translated the term *tendence* into a measure of the adequacy of art as a means of achieving its particular end: “The tendentiousness of modern art is given by its

purposefulness [účelnost].”⁵² This equation of tendentiousness with purposefulness allowed Teige to view the apparently unavoidable dilemma of choosing between either socially uncommitted *l’art pour l’art* or socially dogmatic tendentiousness art as a false dilemma: both options were misguided due to their misunderstanding of the proper purpose (*účel*) or function of art.⁵³ Ultimately the term “function” simply took over the positive role originally assigned to the category of tendentiousness: “[art] does not have any *tendence* at all—it does, however, have a certain natural function.”⁵⁴ Teige’s move away from proletarian art and towards the precepts of international Constructivism thus occurred through a conceptual shift that saw tendentiousness equated first with social engagement, then with aesthetic purposefulness, and finally with function.

This developmental logic constitutes an important and under-acknowledged factor in the rapid consolidation of Constructivism as a major orientation point for the Czech avant-garde. The external influences on Teige’s formulation of Constructivism are well known: Le Corbusier (whom Teige met during his visit to Paris in mid-1922), Soviet Constructivism (and the variants of international Constructivism gaining currency in Germany and elsewhere in the course of 1922), Roman Jakobson (not only for his mediation of Russian avant-garde poetry after his arrival in Prague but also for his concern with the specific function of “poetic” as opposed to “ordinary” language), and, later, the Prague linguistic circle (although Teige’s relationship to Mukařovský, as was noted above, was one of mutual influence). Nonetheless, it should be clear that these external influences did not descend upon the early Teige as some sort of *deus ex machina* instigating a radical conceptual reversal but rather reinforced and channeled a development that was already taking place in his thought.⁵⁵

The double evolution traced above—from *tendence* to functionalism, and from *lidovost* to mass culture—needs to be borne in mind when examining Teige’s “high avant-gardist” formulations of the mid-twenties onwards. The two early terms clearly foreshadow characteristic tensions within Teige’s later thought: functionalism posited the seamless integration of use-value and aesthetic value, while mass culture attracted Teige precisely due to its absence of any ulterior utility, to the anti-instrumentality of its entertainment value.⁵⁶ The early pairing of *tendence* and *lidovost* thus anticipates the familiar later dualism of Constructivism and Poetism, with all of its internal logical tensions (in particular the conflict between rational and irrational models of modern culture). When only external influences on Teige’s thought are taken into account, the Constructivism/Poetism dualism easily appears (and has often been interpreted as) willful or forced, as if Teige simply wished to accommodate as many of the foreign trends he deemed important as possible.⁵⁷ The embryonic form of the dualism examined above, however, provides insight into how Teige saw these apparently contradictory sides of his thought fitting together. The gap separating goal-oriented functionalism from anti-instrumental eudemonism was not nearly as important for him as the shared nature of these two phenomena as *unavoidable* aspects of modern life. In the case of functionalism this logic is obvious: functionalism responded to physical and economic realities and manipulated them to the engineer’s advantage. But for the early Teige mass culture also represented a coercive force. The response it provoked among the populace was spontaneous, the attraction it exerted was undeniable and unavoidable: in this sense laughter represented a reality just as compelling as reinforced steel. Teige perceived the unavoidability of these two forces as the guarantor of their truth. Modern life, he felt,

was revealing its specific, immanent forms and compelling the adoption and celebration of a lifestyle appropriate to a radically changed era.

In short, Teige felt function and felicitology both emerged from uncompromising engagement with modern reality. This ideal of direct contact or engagement with the immanent shapes of modern life united Teige's theoretical endeavors from the early statements on tendentious proletarian art to the critique of aesthetic autonomy that by the mid-twenties placed him squarely within the mainstream of the contemporary European avant-garde. For this reason Teige's proletarian art stage cannot be interpreted simply through the lens of historical contingency: as a remnant, say, of the "regressive" politicization of culture in the Czech lands before the fall of the Habsburgs, and thus merely as cultural baggage that Teige needed to sift through and shed before he was able to emerge unburdened as a progressive spokesman of the international avant-garde. Nor should Teige's ability in these early years to shift quickly from one position to its diametrical opposite be dismissed simply as youthful whimsy; the logic he followed (I hope to have shown) was too consistent for such an explanation to be satisfying. Rather, Teige seized upon a logical potential lying dormant within the ideological structure of proletarian art, a potential that the later battle lines of modernist cultural politics has made seem startling. But points of conflict are also points of contact, and the logic of Teige's "inconsistency" reveals how thin can be the line of separation between modernism and its Others.

NOTES

1. History, of course, is messier than my scheme: far too many avant-gardists found themselves caught in totalitarian sympathies. But the cultural ideologues in power rarely returned the sentiment. This should make clear that any totalizing or even totalitarian impulse one may wish to ascribe to the avant-garde (as for example by Boris Groys in his influential *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992]) cannot be equated with tendentiousness. Groys also argues that in the extreme case of Stalinist Socialist Realism, the criterion of clear tendentiousness became eerily coded and can be seen as positing the transformation of society in aesthetic terms, as a “party-minded, collective surrealism” (52). But however surreal Socialist Realism may ultimately have become, it was nonetheless motivated by criteria of political control rather than ideals of individual creative revolt and experimental freedom: in this respect the division between political efficacy and aesthetic innovation remained clear.
2. The troubled relationship between the “two avant-gardes” is a classic theme in the scholarship: see, for example, Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 112-116; and Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 8-12. My examination here focuses on left-wing avant-gardes of the early and mid-twentieth century, since they confronted the question of political engagement most directly. Texts such as Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, Walter

Benjamin's "The Author as Producer," André Breton's "The Political Position of Today's Art," Jean-Paul Sartre's "What is Literature?" and Theodor W. Adorno's "Commitment" are among the most famous documents of the various "esthetics and politics" debates of this period. Arguments that Marx and Engels themselves leaned towards an esthetic that was modernist in their time (see, e.g., Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984]) do not change the historical record of anti-modernist cultural politics in Communist states.

3. Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945-1956* (Prague: Torst, 1998), 23. Where not indicated otherwise, translations are my own.
4. Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the political function of the Forged Manuscripts in constructing the "imagined community" of the nascent Czech nation. The most famous manuscripts emerged in 1817-18 and were conclusively demonstrated to be forgeries in 1886. See Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu: České obrození jako kulturní typ* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1983), 127-28. For discussions in English see, e.g., Susan Helen Reynolds, "A Scandal in Bohemia: Herder, Goethe, Masaryk, and the 'War of the Manuscripts'" in *Publications of the English Goethe Society* LXXII (2003): 53-67; Alfred Thomas, "Forging Czechs: The Reinvention of National Identity in the Bohemian Lands," in Judith Ryan and Alfred Thomas, eds., *Cultures of Forgery: Making Nations, Making Selves* (New York: Routledge, 2003), esp. 41-44; Vladimír Macura, "Problems and Paradoxes of the National Revival," in Mikuláš Teich, ed., *Bohemia in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 182-197; Roman Jakobson, "In Memory of V.

V. Hanka,” in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 397-405; and Milan Otáhal, “The Manuscript Controversy in the Czech National Revival” (*Cross Currents* 5 [1986]: 247-277). On Kollár, see Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1994), 43-99 (esp. 59).

5. *Kultura a politika*, 26, and see also 121. Also see Pavel Janoušek et al, eds., *Dějiny české literatury 1945-1989*, Vol. II (Prague: Academia, 2007), 24-25. Kusák identifies this reception as the implicit conceptual framework adopted by Stanislav Kostka Neumann (1875-1947) and Zdeněk Nejedlý (1878-1962), two of the most dogmatic Marxist critics of modernist and avant-gardist trends in the interwar period. In the 1900s and 1910s Neumann had been one of the ground-breaking poets of the Czech Anarchist and Civilist movements, but from the early 1920s on he became known for his increasingly crass denunciations of “bourgeois intellectuals” (and in particular for his strident critique of André Gide’s *Return from the USSR*) and his unrelenting rejection of modernism in general, which exercised great influence in the post-1948 period. Nejedlý, by training a music historian, ultimately became minister of education after 1948 and first president of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. He was a major shaper of cultural policy during the Gottwald era. See *Kultura a politika*, 24, 72, and 135; Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, 217-18 and 303-309; and Jaromír Hořec, *Doba ortelů* (Brno: Scholaris, 1992), 68-72.

6. Stanislav Kostka Neumann, “Umění v sociální revoluci” (Art in the Social Revolution; 1923), in Štěpán Vlačín, ed., *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, vol. I (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 457.
7. For important studies with good bibliographies on Czech structuralism in English, see Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and F. W. Galan, *Historic Structures: The Prague School Project, 1928-1946* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). For recent re-appreciations of the significance of Czech functionalism within the history of modernist architecture, see Jean-Louis Cohen’s “Introduction” to Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. Irena Žantovská Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2000), especially 1-5 and the references in Cohen’s notes; and Derek Sayer, “The Unbearable Lightness of Building—A Cautionary Tale,” in *Grey Room* 16 (2004): 6-35 (especially pp. 10-16). In the context of early twentieth-century Czech functionalist discourses one should also mention the economic theory of the economist, philosopher and politician Karel Engliš (1880-1961), whom Mukařovský cited as an influence on Prague structuralism.
8. On mutual influences between Mukařovský and Teige, see Květoslav Chvatík, “Karel Teige jako teoretik avantgardy,” in *Od avantgardy k druhé moderně (Cestami filozofie a literatury)* (Prague: Torst, 2004), 96-98. Jan Mukařovský explicitly noted the influence of architectural notions of functionalism on Prague School structuralism in “The Place of the Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions,” in *Structure, Sign, and Function*, Peter Steiner and John Burbank, eds. and trans.

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 37. See also “On the Problem of Functions in Architecture” in *ibid*, 239. The cross-pollination between the scholarly activities of the Prague School and the endeavors of Czech avant-garde artists, writers, and architects in the twenties and thirties was grounded not only in a sense of shared purpose but also, often enough, in personal friendships. See in this regard the poet Vítězslav Nezval’s effusive dedication to Mukařovský in *Pět prstů* (Brno: Kilian, 1932), 3-5. On the broader interconnections between avant-gardists and Prague School structuralists (especially Roman Jakobson), see Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), chapter 11; Vratislav Effenberger, “Roman Jakobson and the Czech Avant-Garde Between the Two Wars,” trans. Iris Urwin, in *American Journal of Semiotics* 2 (1983): 13-21; Jiří Veltruský, “Jan Mukařovský’s Structural Poetics and Esthetics,” in *Poetics Today*, 2/1b (Winter, 1980-1981): 129; and Květoslav Chvatík, *Strukturalismus a avantgarda* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970).

9. See Robert B. Pynsent, “Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation,” in Robert B. Pynsent, ed., *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 121. As Pynsent points out elsewhere, the break with Revivalist rhetoric had already been initiated by the preceding generation of writers such as Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853-1912) and Julius Zeyer (1841-1901); see Pynsent, “Czech Decadence,” in Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*

(Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 349. One of the other major documents of the Czech *moderna*, the “Manifest české moderny” (1895), does state explicitly political aims, such as greater cooperation between Czechs and Bohemian Germans, universal suffrage, and greater integration of women into social and cultural life. This is clearly a call for a tolerant politics, however, and thus fits well with the critical individualism espoused elsewhere in the “Manifesto” and with the cosmopolitanism of these fin-de-siècle movements as a whole.

10. Šalda, “H. P. Berlage: Grundlagen und Entwicklung der Architektur” (1909), in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, Vol. 16, eds. Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička, and Karel Dvořák (Prague: Československý spiovatel, 1953), 353.
11. To be sure, Šalda’s claims would not have been seconded by the editors of *Moderní revue*, such as Jiří Karásek (1871-1951), who wrote for example that “the attempt to make art socially useful and beneficial leads to the denigration of art into literary craft” (“Sociální užitečnost umění” [The Social Usefulness of Art, (1895)], here cited from Otto M. Urban and Luboš Merhaut, eds., *Moderní revue, 1894-1925* [Prague: Torst, 1995], 292). There were numerous points of contention among the protagonists behind *Moderní revue*, *Volné směry*, and the “Manifest,” but Šalda’s line of argument was influential not only within the discourse of the Czech fin-de-siècle but also on the interwar avant-garde. Even the explicitly elitist and individualist figures of the fin-de-siècle (including Karásek himself) never shunned nationalist themes, although their treatment was often idiosyncratic; see Pynsent, “Czech Decadence,” 351. Peter Bugge, synthesizing arguments by Macura and Pynsent, claims: “Czech decadence has, to be decadent, to reject anything

‘naturally’ or ‘conventionally’ Czech, but this gesture of negation not only inscribes it in an archetypically Czech tradition, it also puts it in the service of a project it by nature had to rebel against: the development of Czech national culture”; see “Naked Masks: Arthur Breisky or How to be a Czech Decadent,” in *Slovo a smysl/Word & Sense* 5 (2006): 262.

12. An overview in English of Teige’s extremely varied interests and activities is presented in Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha, eds., *Karel Teige, 1900-1951: L’Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1999).
13. In cultural debates on the Left Teige typically took the more radical side. This began early: in 1921 Teige argued that Devětsil openly declare loyalty to communism rather than a more generalized and non-partisan idea of revolution; see Vratislav Effenberger, “Nové umění,” which appears as the afterword to Karel Teige, *Výbor z díla*, eds. Jiří Brabec, Vratislav Effenberger, Květoslav Chvatík, and Robert Kalivoda, vol. 1, *Svět stavby a básně* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966), 584. (The three-volume *Výbor z díla* [Selected Works] hereinafter referenced as “VzD” followed by a volume number.) Rostislav Švácha has documented Teige’s conflicts with Devětsil’s architectural section (Ardev) over his strict understanding of the functionalist imperative; see *The Architecture of New Prague, 1895-1945*, trans. Alexandra Büchler (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 275-76. These conflicts clearly presaged Teige’s famous polemic with Le Corbusier over the “academicism” of the latter’s Mundaneum project (major documents of this debate are translated in *Oppositions* 4 [1974]: 83-108). Finally, in the so-called

“Generational Discussion” that shook Devětsil at the end of the twenties, Teige took the side of those defending the ascent of the hard-line Klement Gottwald leadership within the Czech Communist Party—an allegiance that is bitterly ironic in light of post-war developments (see the commentary in *VzD/I*, 566 ff.).

14. Josef Vojvodík has trenchantly analyzed parallels between the historical distortions and absolutizing rhetoric in certain key texts from the Surrealist period and later dogmatic Communist practice; see “Četba jako deformování a permanentní zraňování textu: několik poznámek ke koncepci máchovského sborníku *Ani labuť ani Lúna* (1936),” in Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp, eds., *Český surrealismus, 1929-1953* (Prague: Argo and Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1996), 219-235.
15. Teige’s often rigid Marxist convictions never lamed his ability to criticize party line, most often in aesthetic questions but also on inflammatory political issues such as the 1936 Moscow trials. Indeed, Teige cited his “undisciplined nature” as the reason he never joined the Czechoslovak Communist Party. The official campaign against Teige after 1948 was most acerbically formulated in Mojmír Grygar’s polemic, “Teigovština—trocistická agentura v naší kultuře” (Teige-ese—A Trotskyite Agency in Our Culture) (*Tvorba* 20/42-44 [1951]: 1008-10, 1036-38, and 1060-62). Teige’s vilification is described (with considerable animus) by Jaromír Hořec, *Doba ortelů*, 97 and 103-105; and Václav Černý, *Paměti 1945-1972*, 2nd ed., (Brno: Atlantis, 1992), 251-52. Symptomatic in this context is the depressing exchange of letters between Teige and Ladislav Štoll in 1950, reproduced in *VzD/III*, 581-93, in which Teige attempted retroactively to explain his pre-war positions. Štoll (1902-1981) was minister of education and of culture

during the 1950s and a central architect of official Communist cultural ideology in Czechoslovakia after 1948; he was primarily responsible for the reductive historical model of twentieth-century Czech literature pitting “progressive” against “reactionary” camps, or, roughly, Neumann and the poet Jiří Wolker (1900-1924) against Teige and the poet František Halas (1901-1949). For some time after Teige’s death the rumor circulated (repeated by André Breton among others) that he had committed suicide in the face of official hounding. In fact he died of heart failure; see Vratislav Effenberger, “Ediční poznámka” in Teige, *Vývojové proměny v umění* (Prague: Nakladatelství československých výtvarných umělců, 1966), 336; and Jaroslav Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1992), 509-511.

16. Neumann’s role in this story is complex: while in the 1920s and 30s he was without doubt among the most vociferous Czech critics of modernism (see notes 5 and 6), he had earlier been one of its most important supporters. In 1921 his journal *Kmen* published the first Czech translation of any text by Franz Kafka (Milena Jesenská’s translation of “The Stoker”), and in 1919 another journal he edited, *Červen*, published Karel Čapek’s translation of Guillaume Apollinaire’s “Zone,” widely regarded as a watershed in the development of Czech modernist poetry (see, e.g., Jan Mukařovský, “*Francouzská poesie K. Čapka*” [1936], in *Studie II*, eds. Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič [Brno: Host, 2007], 300-304; and Deborah Garfinkle, “Karel Čapek’s ‘Pásmo’ and the Construction of Literary Modernity Through the Art of Translation,” in *Slavic and East European Review* 47/3: 345-366). The young Devětsil generation took inspiration from Neumann’s earlier

poetry and essays and initially regarded him as mentor: Jaroslav Seifert's first volume of poetry, *Město v slzách* (*City in Tears* [1921]) is dedicated to Neumann, "one of the kindest of poets." More dramatically, Devětsil's breakthrough 1922 anthology, *Život II* (*Life II*) features a two-page spread where the title of Neumann's 1920 essay collection, *Ať žije život!* (*Long Live Life!*) is splashed diagonally in red ink over the text—an innovative use of such overprinting in avant-garde typography. On Neumann's early support for Devětsil, see Květoslav Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavěk a vývoj české marxistické estetiky* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1962), chapter 2. Neumann's development away from modernism and towards a sharply agitational line was thus in many ways the inverse of Teige's and Devětsil's.

17. I have elsewhere examined conceptual aftershocks of proletarian art within Teige's avant-garde position of the mid- and later 1920s; see "The Style of the Present: Karel Teige on Constructivism and Poetism" in *Representations* 88 (Fall 2004): 102-124. Also see Esther Levinger, "Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia," *Slavic and East European Journal* 48/2 (2004): 247-274; Zdeněk Pešat, "Mezi proletářskou poezií a poetismem," *Česká literatura* 50/5 (2002): 500-505; and Markéta Brousek, *Der Poetismus: Die Lehrjahre der tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975), 85. However, Levinger's account does not sufficiently distinguish between the early phases of Teige's development. Pešat's interpretation of proletarian art as a distortion away from the "natural" developmental line of Czech poetics does not account for the ongoing development and echoes of proletarian art in Socialist Realism. Brousek

contrasts the “fluid process” of Teige’s development (85) to the “new beginning” marked by Nezval’s joining of Devětsil (79). This critical tendency in fact echoes the judgment expressed in 1928 by Šalda that “there is no break or abyss between the so-called proletarian and poetist layers of our youngest poetic movement” (“O nejmladší poesii české,” in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, eds. Jan Mukařovský and Felix Vodička, vol. 8, *Studie z české literatury*, [Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1961], 134). For Teige’s own retrospective analysis of this period (albeit reflecting political pressures of the early 1950s), see his letter reproduced in *VzD/III*, 581-86.

18. Rajendra Chitnis, however, has recently examined similar themes in the early development of the modernist prose writer (and founding chairman of Devětsil) Vladislav Vančura; see *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde* (Prague: Karolinum, 2007), 36-41.
19. I do not address here the often-discussed issue of how to differentiate modernism from the avant-garde—a distinction that rarely bothered theorists of the time. Teige, for example, commonly used the terms interchangeably. In regard to the issues to be examined below, the movements now termed the historical avant-garde assumed the most radically combative positions. My conviction is that if ambiguities can be revealed even in the face of these sharply pointed oppositions, then those ambiguities hold relevance even for the broader and more differentiated phenomena that have traditionally gone under the label of high modernism.
20. This can be seen as early as Josef Jungmann’s *Second Conversation on the Czech Language*: “What should I say about those [who] consider Czech a peasant language. Poor little things! They don’t know that where it is indigenous every

language is a peasant language, and that the peasant is the most important inhabitant of the land [...] [***]. Sayer gives a useful account of the ideological resonances of the notion of the *český lid*, especially around the turn of the twentieth century; see *The Coasts of Bohemia*, 118 ff. On Herder's influence in the Czech lands, see, e.g., Jaromír Loužil, "K zápasu o J. G. Herder u nás," in *Česká literatura* 53/5 (2005), 637-653.

21. "Nové umění a lidová tvorba" (The New Art and Popular Artistic Production; 1921), in Vlašín, ed., *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, vol. I, 150.
22. "Umění dnes a zítra" (Art Today and Tomorrow), in Karel Teige and Jaroslav Seifert, eds., *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (Prague: Verčernice V. Vortel, 1922), 200. Emphases in original.
23. See Teige, "Nové umění a lidová tvorba," 152. Čapek's *Nejskromější umění* was published in 1920 but several of the essays had been published in journals in 1918-1919.
24. *Nejskromější umění* also clearly anticipates the essays by Josef's brother, Karel Čapek, in *Marsyas, čili na okraj literatury* (*Marsyas, or on the Periphery of Literature*), (Prague: Aventinum, 1931). Karel Čapek's essays appeared in journals for the most part in the later 1920s before being collected into one volume.
25. Josef Čapek, *Nejskromější umění* (Prague: Dauphin, 1997), 9.
26. See *ibid*, 12. Čapek's discussion of use-value as a source of the particular power of the most humble art also led him to emphasize its "constructive intentions"; see *ibid*, 19.
27. "Nové umění proletářské" [The New Proletarian Art; 1922], in *VzD/I*, 57.

28. See “Umění dnes a zítra,” 189, and “Nové umění proletářské,” 58.
29. “Obrazy a předobrazy” (Images and Fore-Images; 1921), in *VzD/I*, 26; “Nové umění proletářské,” 45; and Teige’s 1923 review of Ilya Ehrenburg’s *Yet It Turns*, quoted in *VzD/I*, 520. The skepticism towards Italian Futurism nonetheless did not prevent Devětsil members from graciously hosting F. T. Marinetti at Teige’s house.
30. “Obrazy a předobrazy,” 28. See also “Nové umění proletářské,” 49; and “Umění přítomnosti,” (Art of the Present), in *Život II: Nové umění, konstrukce, soudobá intelektuální aktivita* (*Life II: The New Art, Construction, Contemporary Intellectual Activity*) (Prague: Umělecká beseda, 1922), 120. Teige continued to characterize Dada as the culminating product of bourgeois social crisis even after he began to appreciate its importance as a preparatory stage for later avant-garde movements. See his “Dada,” in *Host VI* (1926), 38-39 (translated in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930* [Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002], 379-80. Also see Jindřich Toman, “Dada Well-Constructed: Karel Teige’s Early Rationalism,” in *Umění* 43/1-2 (1995): 29-33; and Jindřich Chalupecký, “O dada, surrealismu, a českém umění,” in *Cestou necestou* (Jinočany: Nakladatelství H&H, 1999), 194-228.
31. “Obrazy a předobrazy,” 29. See also Teige’s claim that *peinture pure* and the simultaneous poetry of Apollinaire presupposed “forms that were surprising, mechanical and sharp, resembling the foundation of megalopolises with wide commercial avenues, factories and skyscrapers” as well as “gigantic, monstrous, inhuman pistons, transmissions, and levers” (“Novým směrem” [In a New

Direction; 1923], in Stěpán Vlašín, ed., *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, vol. 1, *Od proletářského umění k poetismu, 1919-1924* [Prague: Svoboda, 1971], 91).

32. “Obrazy a předobrazy,” 26. See also “Novým směrem,” 93.
33. Precisely these resonances distinguish the Czech term from the German term “völkisch” and allowed Teige to construe *lidovost* as something potentially progressive and cosmopolitan. Teige’s etymological interpretation, however, exerted little influence. Over the course of the 1940s (and especially directly after the war) the adjective *lidový* proved all too efficient in absorbing fascist (“völkisch”) connotations and indeed in fusing them with Communist terminology (such as “lidová republika” [“peoples’ republic”]); see Robert B. Pynsent “Conclusory Essay: Activists, Jews, the Little Czech Man, and Germans,” in *Central Europe* 5/2 (2007): esp. 268-273.
34. “Doba a umění” (Art and the Age; 1923), in *Stavba a báseň (Building and Poem)* (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), 28. See also “K nové architektuře” (On the New Architecture; 1923), in *VzD/I*, 120. Cinema was perhaps the central phenomenon in which Teige saw ground being reclaimed against the alienating tendencies of technology; see, e.g., “Foto kino film,” in *Život II*, 156. Teige’s fascination with cinema was grounded not only in its status as technological art form but also in its undeniable and spontaneous mass appeal. Thus, as Levinger remarks, Teige implicitly regarded cinema as “a modern form of proletarian art” (247).
35. Teige can plausibly be counted, along with Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch, among the thinkers who anticipated the themes of a humanist or reform Marxism well before the publication of Marx’s key early texts. This is likely one of the reasons

- why Teige represented such an important inspiration for Czech reform Marxism in the 1960s: see, e.g., Robert Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost a marxismus* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970), and Květoslav Chvatík, *Smysl moderního umění* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965), especially 78-79.
36. “K teorií konstruktivismu” (On the Theory of Constructivism; 1928), in *VzD/I*: 365. Precisely this grounding of Teige’s radical functionalism in a conception of humanism has too often been overlooked in accounts of Teige’s famous 1929 polemic with Le Corbusier over the latter’s design for the Mundaneum (see Zusi, “The Style of the Present,” 113-115).
37. See, e.g., Jan Mukařovský, ed., *Dějiny české literatury*, vol. 4 (Prague: Akademie, 1995), 199; and Levinger, 251.
38. “Nové umění proletářské,” 58.
39. *Ibid*, 59.
40. The term is from Oleg Sus, “Ceský poetismus 1924,” *Divadlo* (October 1964) 8: 28.
41. Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (trans. Michael Shaw; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) represents the most influential formulation of these claims.
42. See Neumann, “K otázce umění třídního a proletářského” (On the Question of Class-Based and Proletarian Art; 1923), in *Konfese a konfrontace II: Stati o umění a kultuře* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1988), especially 406-411. Also see Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavek*, 73-76.

43. See in this respect Jiří Stromšík, “Rezeption der europäischen Moderne in der tschechischen Avantgarde,” in Klaus Schenk, ed., *Moderne in der deutschen und der tschechischen Literatur* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2000), 52-53.
44. “Proletářské umění,” (Proletarian Art; 1922), in *Dilo Jiřího Wolкера*, ed. Miloslav Novotný, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Prague: Václav Petr, 1930), 288. Levinger claims that “Devětsil’s singular position was to reject all tendentious content” (248), and at the end of the same paragraph containing this claim even quotes from “Proletářské umění” while ignoring the call for artistic tendentiousness expressed so stridently in that essay. This confusion reflects Levinger’s blurring of Devětsil’s proletarian art and Poetist phases: while her claim is valid for the period *after* Devětsil abandoned proletarian art, it clearly is *not* for the earlier phases. Levinger’s silence about this early commitment to tendentiousness forces her into logical contortions when she later tries to explain the emergence (which is in fact a *re-emergence*) of a crudely tendentious side to some of Teige’s writings in the early 1930s (see Levinger, 262-3).
45. To be sure, the Havlíček quote was particularly attractive to Teige and Wolker because it attempted to defend the category of tendentiousness against its cruder manifestations (see below).
46. “Nové umění proletářské,” 49. Emphasis in original.
47. Teige quotes Havlíček Borovský (with the emphasis) in “Nové umění proletářské,” 54. His own comment appears on page 53 of the same article.
48. “Nové umění proletářské,” 55.

49. “Nové umění proletářské,” 33. The argument over the freedom of the artist in relation to proletarian art began with the critic Arne Novák’s criticism of the text “Proletářské umění.” Wolker responded with an argument similar to Teige’s quoted above. See “Ochránci umělecké svobody” (The Defenders of Artistic Freedom; 1922), in *Dílo Jiřího Wolker*, vol. I, 292-94.
50. “Nové umění proletářské,” 33-34. Teige’s emphasis.
51. See Peter Zusi, “Echoes of the Epochal: Historicism and the Realism Debate” in *Comparative Literature* 56/3 (2004): 220; and Jan Wiendl “Barbaři a apoštolové: Črty k otázce tendenčnosti a neporozumění v české literatuře počátku 20. let 20. století,” in *Slovo a smysl/Word & Sense* 2/1 (2004): 160.
52. “Umění dnes a zítra,” 200. Emphasis in original. Not long after this the term *tendence* started to become decisively derogatory for Teige.
53. See “Doba a umění,” 36.
54. “Doba a umění,” 45.
55. In addition one must bear in mind important Czech influences, such as the early proto-constructivist texts of Šalda. See Brousek, *Der Poetismus*, 103, and Zusi, “Style of the Present,” 106.
56. Later Teige would become much more aware of mass culture’s utility value for those controlling the culture industry, but this critical moment was absent in his earlier reflections.
57. On the various theoretical interpretations of Teige’s dual program of the mid-1920s, see Zusi, “The Style of the Present.”