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Review of Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form*
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Cedric Van Dijck

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Reviews

Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017). 352 pp. ISBN 9780231179768

Global Modernism has recently taken the core premise of the New Modernist Studies — to think of modernism in more expansive terms — to its natural extreme: the planet. Modern periodical studies is lagging behind, and, going by the three-volume landmark *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (2009–13), continues to place its focus on Britain/Ireland, North America, and Europe. This is surprising: from the very start of the twentieth century and earlier, the magazine form travelled far and wide, in spite of it being characterized as little, short-lived, or ephemeral. Enter *Little Magazine, World Form*. In this fascinating and paradigm-shifting book, Eric Bulson considers the littleness of the modernist magazine on a global scale. With case-studies covering the planet, Bulson asks ‘how the little magazine actually worked, where it came from and went over the course of the twentieth century’ (p. 2), and what these worldly movements ultimately have to say about modernism. His concern is with the small magazine as a global phenomenon, a world form, and not with any kind of ‘world magazine’. The latter is an impossibility. Though shaped by transnational processes in intricate ways, singular instances of the medium remain entrenched in their national or local contexts, however far they may go.

Time and again, critics have raised question marks at such an approach, arguing that it hollows out our idea of modernism as a kind of formal experimentalism grounded in a response to the reifying experience of early twentieth-century modernity in the West. Modernism, they say, is not formal experimentalism *per se*. We’re so familiar with these and other criticisms that it is unnecessary for me to rehearse them here. To the book’s

credit, the benefits of its global scope far outweigh any shortcomings. Bulson is not out to stretch our understanding of modernism too far beyond its historical parameters and contexts, but to study how these contexts interact with what comes later (think, post-colonialism) or happens elsewhere (say, Tokyo or Trinidad). The little magazine is the perfect medium to show these interactions at work. And that task is here done with extreme care. Where other accounts of border crossing are often larger than life — making (too) much of the possibilities of the network and of early twentieth-century technologies and infrastructures — *Little Magazine, World Form* steers away from any such totalizing impulse. It is most compelling in those places where it allows space for the limitations and failures of the transnational project as they manifest themselves in the physical life of a magazine. The first chapter sets the tone for such a trajectory by introducing a critical vocabulary that helps us rethink the network in terms other than ‘flow’: disconnection, exile, lateness, and immobility. ‘For us’, Bulson writes, ‘the difficulty involves figuring out what sustained the network if it was not a coherent set of linkages in and between magazine cultures around the globe’ (p. 47). The author’s insight into friction and disconnection stems not only from his keen eye for the practicalities of magazine-making; it also follows from the concept around which his inquiry turns — *form* (not magazine as merely container, then, but as medium and material object). Bulson posits that ‘[i]t is precisely by examining the form that we can better understand how the little magazine functioned in the world’ (p. 21). And how it functioned — or often did not function,

it turns out — bears on modernism's own inconsistencies and false starts.

The five chapters that follow, outlining how the little magazine began to lay claim to being a world form in the twentieth century, are framed around five thematic clusters: the transatlantic market, Italian Futurism, the little exile magazine, the little postcolonial magazine and the little wireless magazine. If you write a book about the planet, then naturally choices have to be made (there is a lot of Italy, for instance, but no Russia). Still, in each of these chapters, Bulson presents close readings of a set of carefully chosen magazines that, together, extend from World War One and classical modernism to the 1960s and beyond. What the reader might look for, but will not find, is any (brief) reflection on a similar movement reaching back in time, from modernism into the 1890s, when the little magazine, at least in Europe and America, came of age. Such a move would have rounded out some of the claims the book makes about the history of the form. This is far from saying that the author's case for modernism's reach across the globe and into the future is not compelling. With a sustained effort to include quotations in the original language, it even makes for a polyphonic whole.

Chapter two hones in on what for many readers of this book will be familiar territory: Joyce, Eliot, Ford, and Pound in the transatlantic marketplace. Bulson reads these usual suspects against the grain, illustrating a key point he raised in the first chapter. 'If we want to go on arguing that modernism was a transatlantic phenomenon', he puts it, 'then we will also have to be willing to acknowledge it was in spite of the fact that communication through the little magazine was seriously restricted, connectivity hard to come by' (p. 75). The simultaneous serial publication of *Ulysses* in the *Little Review* and the *Egoist* is a case in point: the fact that instalments of the novel appeared in two magazines, one on each side of the Atlantic, indicates that periodicals could

never cross the divide as seamlessly as is often believed. Lateness and laws go some distance toward explaining why. The following chapter, equally attentive to the material life of the medium, sheds a more positive light on the act of breaking out of national bounds by detailing the strategies employed by four *riviste* from Milan to make Italian literature more modern and more European, in spite of Fascism. It is precisely this friction between the local and the global — the chapter's title is 'In Italia, all'estero', in Italy, and abroad — that surfaces throughout the case studies in this book.

With chapter four on the 'Little Exile Magazine' we move more clearly outside of Europe. The chapter considers how the condition of exile was inscribed in the physical form of two little magazines, *Broom* (1921–24), published in Rome then shipped to the US, and *VVV* (1942–44), a surrealist periodical printed in the Americas but intended for a French audience. Both case studies are insightful on how an editor sees a magazine to print, and what these details and decisions — typos, the choice of paper, the price of printing — imply about the way a magazine relates to its place of origin and its place of destination. Exile, in Bulson's perceptive close reading, makes the literary field not less but more nationalistic, throwing into relief a claim made earlier in the book that no matter how far a magazine travels, it remains embedded within a national print culture. Chapter five, 'Little Postcolonial Magazine', builds on this insight, and it is theoretically the most ambitious chapter: an attempt to read modernism and post-colonialism against each other through the form of the little magazine. On a surface level, *Black Orpheus* (Lagos, 1957–67) and *Transition* (Kampala, 1961–76) may have nothing to do with the kind of high modernist publications that figured prominently in the book so far, but both types of venture, whether they exist in response to decolonization (in the Global South) or an increasingly commercialized literary sphere (in the West), are alike in

that they work through the same *form*, the little magazine. This, then, is a book about the adaptability of that form, and its potential. The challenge in reading modernist and postcolonial print cultures in conjunction, Bulson cautions, is to move beyond simple chronologies — ‘(first the magazine made modernism in the West, then it made modern literature in the colonies)’ (p. 219) — and toward a much more nuanced account that appreciates the possibilities of one single form as much as it does the specificity of its many contexts.

The final and most original chapter of *Little Magazine, World Form* takes another turn for the unexpected. Returning to the case of the Italian Futurists, who published more than a hundred titles within their own borders, Bulson recounts how the medium responded to the invention of wireless telegraphy, which made the periodical seem anachronistic and slow in comparison. But rather than rendering the little magazine obsolete, new technologies challenged the Futurists to reinvent print communication. The chapter charts a network of local Futurist magazines across the Italian peninsula that functioned like ‘a collection of transmitters’ (p. 245), a number of which were ‘live’ at any given time. Enthusiasts could ‘plug in’ from anywhere in the country. This system of many interconnected publications instead of one flagship journal ensured not simply the survival and reach of the movement; it decentred the literary field, reconceptualizing Futurism ‘less as a stable entity and more as a living organism that actually changed shape over time with the constant rising and falling of magazine titles and the urban and regional relationships that were formed’

(p. 250). And what the wireless meant for the Futurists, digitalization means for us: a new technology that changes the way we look at, think about, and access periodicals. Bulson’s coda on the ‘Little Digittle Magazine’ reflects on the possibilities the digital turn in the humanities holds for modern periodical studies. More appealing to me is the implicit call with which the book ends: there are many more periodicals in just as many places where one could begin an assessment of the little magazine in the twentieth century. Have at it!

Little Magazine, World Form, then, finally, comes into its own as an inquiry into scale. Bulson excels at attributing to the smallness of a form global ramifications, at making the details of the material object and the practicalities of its publication and circulation processes speak to the big words that are common currency in our research practices: ‘modernism’, most importantly, but also ‘form’, ‘network’, and ‘world literature’. The result is a global history of the little magazine that restores a sense of the disconnecting and decentralizing forces at play in the twentieth-century literary field. For me, that’s a wonderfully fresh way of looking at things, and it leaves in its wake the image of a resilient modernism that thrived not because of the many gains the modern world yielded, but often in spite of them. Incisive, original and lucidly written, *Little Magazine, World Form* makes for compelling reading, and it will appeal to many audiences, interested in periodical studies, modernist studies, network analysis, postcolonial studies, world literature, and digital humanities.

Cedric Van Dijck
Ghent University