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The Tendentiousness of Multilingualism in the Central European Interwar Avant-Garde

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The Tendentiousness of Multilingualism in the Central European Interwar Avant-Garde

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In my research and writing on the Czech interwar avant-garde, I focus on the printed matter generated by Devětsil, a group comprised of leftist poets, artists, architects, actors, and dancers in the cities of Prague and Brno. My approach to the group's production of books and magazines aims to be as interdisciplinary and multimedial as the group was itself. As such, I consider the presence of multilingualism in Devětsil publications from both a textual and visual perspective. In the context of the Czech avant-garde, which operated in a small, Central European language and inscribed geography with the aim of being conversant with interlocutors across the European continent, there was special emphasis on publishing theoretical texts and poetry in several different languages — primarily French and German — so as to be comprehensible to an audience abroad. At the same time, translation into Czech was a feature in these publications. In this way, they also managed to expose local audiences to an international avant-garde. But since the majority of published text was in the Czech language, it was on the basis of the graphic design of the books and magazines of Devětsil that they were immediately rendered legible to avant-garde peers who could not read Czech. The editors were also strategic in terms of the photographic images and illustrations they selected to publish on the pages of these magazines, and this served as a curatorial method for signaling their alliance with simultaneous movements in other countries.¹

It is ironic that despite the concerted efforts of various actors across the avant-garde movements in Central Europe to be read by other artists and authors to East and West, and their relative success in making this happen, in contemporary scholarship and curatorial practices these avant-garde movements are routinely left out of histories of the European interwar avant-garde. This omission can be seen as both evidence of linguistic limitations and the legacy of the Cold War, which continue to inhibit the ways in which these avant-garde movements are contextualized in the Anglo-American university

1 In my past publications, I highlight some of the specific outcomes and successes of these various multilingual strategies by the Czech avant-garde. See, for instance: Meghan Forbes, 'Devětsil and Dada: A Poetics of Play in the Interwar Czech Avant-Garde', *ArtMargins*, 9.3 (2020), 7–28; 'A Beautiful New World: Reflections of Russian Revolution in Avant-Garde Czech Print', in *Realisms of the Avant-Garde: European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies*, ed. by Moritz Baßler, Benedikt Hjartarson, Ursula Frohne, David Ayers, and Sascha Bru (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 279–97; 'The Politics of Translation: Textual-Visual Strategies towards Transnational Network Building in the Periodicals of the Czech Interwar Avant-Garde', in *Literary Translation in Periodical Publications. Theoretical Problems and Methodological Challenges for a Transnational Approach*, ed. by Laura Fólca, Diana Roig-Sanz, and Stefania Caristia (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2020), 361–80; and "'To Reach over the Border": An International Conversation Between the Bauhaus and Devětsil', *Umění/Art*, 64.3–4 (2016), 291–303.

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and museum context, and has repercussions for the way students are introduced to the history of Europe in the twentieth century. And it is but one instance of many such an exclusion, from a region relatively close to the 'centres' that continue to receive the vast majority of scholarly attention and institutional support in western Europe and the United States. Additionally, as I attempt to show in my most recent writing, while calls have become more common to decentre the history of the European interwar avant-gardes in order to include major nodes in Central and Eastern Europe, there is nonetheless little self-reflection from within the field as to how these peripheral avant-gardes themselves failed in their purported project of destabilizing hierarchies. Often, members of groups such as Devětsil employed strategies that attempted to assert their own proximity to western Europe in order to gain visibility and respect, rather than taking an outwardly critical stance towards the colonial violence enacted from there.

It is imperative when working within Anglo-centric spaces on topics that precisely cast light on the limitations of focusing narrowly on monolingual and/or US and western European publication histories, that we consider how to advance a more inherently plural and multilingual path for future scholarship that simultaneously questions the very modes and means through which we come to have these conversations. This would likewise necessitate interrogating the ways that universities and other cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums, continue to actively invisibilize certain histories and reify colonial and patriarchal structures of power, as the academic workforce labours under increasingly precarious conditions.

Meghan Forbes holds a PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Leonard A. Lauder Research Center for Modern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2019–21) and C-MAP Fellow for Central and Eastern Europe at the Museum of Modern Art (2017–19). Dr. Forbes contributes regularly to a range of academic and popular publications as well as exhibition catalogues.