



Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz, eds. *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation*

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The long-overdue edited volume *Modernism in Kyiv* firmly places the Ukrainian capital on the cultural map of the world and situates it on the same level as other centres of the avant-garde production such as Paris, Vienna, London, New York, and Moscow. Hitherto categorized under the label of “Soviet” or “Russian,” Kyiv’s contribution to the cultural front at the beginning of the twentieth century was visible only to the specialists in the field, but this meticulously researched and carefully edited volume possesses the power of a manifesto ready to proclaim it to a wider audience. Anyone with an interest in modernism generally, and its Eastern European versions in particular, should read this work, for it challenges pre-existing notions and redefines key concepts such as the break from authority, elitist impulses, fragmentation and ruin, cult of technology, urbanism, and alienation. All of these familiar concepts are either inverted or radically re-imagined when placed into Kyivan context. Using theatre, with its synthetic nature, as a focal point of condensation for other arts – such as music, stage design, costume, dance, painting, and even cinematography – the book constructs the multi-layered image of a city saturated with joyful experimentation and multi-cultural creativity.

The twenty chapters of the volume, interconnected by poetry or insightful excerpts of contemporaneous historical documents, are abundantly illustrated (including even colour plates) and constitute an engaging discussion to which some authors contribute historical and contextual knowledge, while others offer insightful interpretations and comparative overviews. A plethora of Ukrainian authors who pioneered the research on the avant-garde in the Soviet Union when it was not encouraged, to put it mildly, and whose style is far removed from the rigorous standards of academic writing in the English-speaking world, provide a welcomed reminder of the deeply personal and sometimes mundane nature of research, of the vulnerability of the material, and of the urgency entrusted into the next generations to preserve it thorough publications before it disappears physically – as in the case of a newspaper archive lost as a result of flooding (139) – or becomes inaccessible (e.g. due to a change in the political orientation of the state, see Chapters 5, 6 and 20).

The volume as a whole is best characterized by its focus on the word “multitude”: the multitude of nationalities (Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Jewish, Georgian, and German)

producing cross-fertilizing, enriching, or conflicting narratives, all of which fuel the creative meaning-producing art industries. At the same time, this multitude led to the difficulties in pinning down “the definition” and “the identity” of the city (as well as, by and large, the country) throughout history. Hence the reason for Ukraine’s “hyper-sensitized self-awareness” (19), which is present in each chapter, but never allows it to slip into nationalistic overtones. The uneasy relations between nationalism and socialism, as understood in Ukraine at the beginning of the twentieth century, underpin the avant-garde movement and the volume as a whole, yet each author manages to preserve distance in analysis while carefully tracing the “palpable national dimension” (118).

It would not be an overestimation to claim that the figure of theatre director and actor Les Kurbas dominates the volume and defines its logic chronologically, contextually, and quantitatively. Seven chapters focus on different stages and angles of his career, leaving an uneasy feeling that the remaining thirteen are merely there for context setting. Conveniently, Kurbas’s theatrical endeavours involved: choreography, which was majorly influenced by the brief period Bronislava Nijinska spent in Kyiv (Chapter 11); music, which led to the inclusion of the chapter on musical Modernism as well as one focused exclusively on music in Kurbas’s theatrical productions (Chapters 12 and 13); stage and costume design, which brought about explorations in the graphic arts (which will be of special interest to the *SHARP News* readers) and abstract art (Chapters 6 and 16); and finally, film which gave readers a chance to familiarize themselves with the cinematic culture of pre-Revolutionary Kyiv and Kurbas’s own film debuts (Chapters 5 and 17). Thus Kurbas-centricism is a prominent feature of the volume, which perhaps would benefit from a more balanced framework, or a change of the title, for what is missing from the abundance of diverse material so brilliantly put together is Kyiv itself. Since Kyiv barely constituted the centre of Kurbas’s activities (he arrived there only in 1916, and then shared his time between Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odessa), the city is not as strongly present as it could be. Architectural, photographic, cinematographic, quotidian, and everyday visions of the city are not analyzed at all, whereas “Kyiv in text” is only represented by three novels in which it is not explicitly named either – *The Pit* by Aleksandr Kuprin, *The White Guard* by Mikhail Bulgakov, and *The City* by Valerian Pidmohylny (Chapter 4). However, this fact does not at all diminish the relevance and importance of the volume. In fact, one can only hope that any future work about Kyiv will be treated with the same amount of respect for material, breadth of context, thoroughness and originality of research, and wealth of



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illustrations as *Modernism in Kyiv* undoubtedly is.

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