

THE INTEGRITY OF THE AVANT-GARDE
KAREL TEIGE AND THE BIOGRAPHY OF AN AMBITION

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Jaroslav Seifert, Karel Teige, and Josef Hora in front of the
Lenin Mausoleum, Moscow, 1925. Pozůstalost Jindřicha Honzla

The Integrity of the Avant-Garde

Karel Teige and the Biography of an Ambition



PETER ZUSI



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For Mirka, always

*and in memory of
Glee and Alf Zusi*

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It is somewhat embarrassing to reveal that parts of this book originated back in the time of my PhD studies. That was quite some time ago. The exigencies of a modern academic career path meant that I did not revise my dissertation for publication as a book at the time, but rather carved it into discrete articles as I began several years of searching for stable employment. The original dissertation focused not on the figure of Karel Teige, who was the subject of just a single chapter, but on conceptions of historicism in the interwar European avant-garde, primarily among German-language thinkers. In the intervening years I have settled into a position where Czech and comparative literature are my main professional occupations, and have published further on Teige and Czech modernism. Returning to the original material now, after many years, I have felt that the broader theoretical and philosophical concerns that drove my dissertation are best served when projected through the specific case study of Teige, a figure I find both fascinating and worthy of wider attention.

So my first and fundamental intellectual debt is to my PhD advisors at the University of Chicago: Françoise Meltzer, Robert Pippin, and František Svejkský. All three of them provided deep inspiration and encouragement, even when I absconded from Chicago to finish the final years of my PhD in Prague. The extraordinary range of their expertise, as well as the general climate of interdisciplinary curiosity they have done so much to foster at the University of Chicago, had a major influence on the shape of my thinking. During my Prague years I benefited greatly from consultations with Jiří Brabec at the Charles University, who was extraordinarily generous with his time, upon which I had no right to make the claims that I did. Two other figures have had an outsized influence on my thinking in particular on Czech modernism. The first is Jindřich Toman of the University of Michigan, who in the early years of my career hosted an annual Czechoslovak Studies Workshop in Ann Arbor, which acted as an intellectual catalyst for several generations of *bohemisté* at English-language universities. Years of our discussions about things avant-garde, and about Teige in particular, have informed my viewpoints in this book. The second figure is Robert Pynsent, who, when I arrived at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies to take up his former position upon his retirement, effectively put me through a second doctoral training ('Oh, you ignorant Yank!'). I needed it, and (for the most part) loved the experience. But above and beyond the example of his vaunted erudition and rigour, Robert offered his encouragement, his humour, and a friendship for which I am profoundly grateful. Several draft chapters have been covered in his

comments written with that fearsome red pen, though to my sorrow I did not complete the full manuscript before his death in 2022.

This book would not exist at all without the impetus of Carolin Duttlinger of the University of Oxford, who first suggested that I go back and expand on my earlier work and submit a proposal for the new Visual Studies series at Legenda. I seriously misjudged how much new research and writing (and revision of older material) such a project would entail, and I thank both Carolin and Graham Nelson, managing editor at Legenda, for their exceptional patience with my multiple missed deadlines and late revisions. Further, I am grateful to Richard Correll for his meticulous copy-editing and tolerance of my last-minute amendments and additions.

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The long and convoluted history of this project means that this book has, to a degree, a split personality: it is both a study of a particular figure, Teige, and an examination of the European avant-garde on a general, theoretical level. My aim has been to make these personalities harmonize, though inevitably some readers will find one or the other aspect of greater interest. Chapter One goes into quite granular detail about Teige's intellectual career during the interwar years. For readers more interested in the broader questions about the avant-garde than in Teige in particular some of this may appear as 'too much information', though this material underlies the discussions in the following chapters — and, it is hoped, may spark curiosity about this less familiar, Czechoslovak cultural context. Chapter Two then lays the foundations for the broader theoretical claims that will be developed in the later chapters of the book.

For kind assistance with securing illustrations I thank the Památník Národního Pisemnictví (Museum of Czech Literature), the Galerie Hlavního Města Prahy (Prague City Gallery), the Pozůstalost Jindřicha Honzla, Adam and Martin Hoffmeister, the Archiv Hlavního Města Prahy (Prague City Archives), the Regionální Muzeum v Kolíně, and the New York City Municipal Archives. I am very grateful to Kriss Roebling for—among many other things—searching through family archives for suitable visual material.

Years of support from my family lie embedded in the following pages. And from one person in particular I have received far more than can be properly acknowledged: Mirka Zusi, without whom so much more than just this book would not exist.

A number of the chapters of this book represent significantly revised and expanded versions of articles published earlier, and I gratefully acknowledge permission to rework this material from the following journals:

parts of Chapter Two first appeared in ‘Toward a Genealogy of Modernism: Herder, Nietzsche, History’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67.4 (2006), 505–25;

a version of Chapter Three appeared as ‘Tendentious Modernism: Karel Teige’s Path to Functionalism’, *Slavic Review*, 67.4 (2008), 821–39;

a version of Chapter Four appeared as ‘The Style of the Present: Karel Teige on Constructivism and Poetism’, *Representations*, 88 (2004), 102–24;

a version of Chapter Six appeared as ‘Echoes of the Epochal: Historicism and the Realism Debate’, *Comparative Literature*, 56.3 (2004), 207–26;

Chapters Seven and Eight expand on my article ‘Vanishing Points: Walter Benjamin and Karel Teige on the Liquidations of Aura’, *Modern Language Review*, 108.2 (2013), 368–95.

p.z., London, February 2024

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE



Teige was a prolific author whose works appeared in a wide range of journals and books, many of which have now become rare and difficult to access. Even many of the republications and collections of his work that appeared in the 1960s or 70s have since become difficult to access. Further, Teige often reused or revised his own work for different venues, meaning that alternate versions exist of some texts without either of them clearly constituting the ‘authoritative’ version. At times he even recycled old titles for new texts. This creates substantial challenges for citing from his works, in particular if one wishes to balance accessibility of the source with clear communication of the publishing history of individual works.

In this book I have wherever possible used versions of Teige’s texts available in two of the most extensive collections of Czechoslovak avant-garde documents. The first is the three-volume *Selected Works* of Teige, compiled during the 1960s though shut down for political reasons just after the second volume appeared in 1969 (most of that print-run was destroyed and for many years this second volume was extremely difficult to find; publication of the third volume only became possible after the political changes of 1989): *Výbor z díla*, ed. by Vratislav Effenberger, Jiří Brabec, Robert Kalivoda and Květoslav Chvatík, 3 vols (Prague: Československý/Český spisovatel, 1966–94). Some bibliographies refer to these volumes by their individual titles: *Svět stavby a básně: Studie z 20. let* (volume 1); *Zápasy o smysl moderní tvorby: Studie z 30. let* (volume 2), and *Osvobozování života a poezie: Studie z 40. let* (volume three). The editorial commentary and accompanying essays in this edition are among the most important achievements in the scholarly literature on Teige. The second source is a three-volume collection of documents not only by Teige but by a wide range of figures across the Czechoslovak avant-garde during the 1920s: *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols. (Prague: Svoboda, 1971). When a particular title appears in both collections, I have given preference to that in the *Výbor z díla*. The bibliography lists not only the versions cited in the footnotes but, where relevant, original publication venues as well.

I have tried to cite existing English translations where they exist. However, one excellent source for English translations of Czechoslovak avant-garde documents (not only by Teige) has been in production more or less simultaneously with this book, making it impossible to cite it systematically: *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourses*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023). Readers without Czech interested in reading further in the original materials are referred there.

INTRODUCTION



Teige and the Integrity of the Avant-Garde

On what grounds do we speak of ‘the avant-garde’ in interwar European culture? Does the term describe more than just the subjective ‘consciousness of a collective identity, connected through organizations (groups of artists, international exhibitions, joint publication projects) and through an innovative aesthetic orientation’?¹ Did the avant-garde have any integral conceptual core or was it more a social construct, a social contract, a wishful sense of alliance among individuals, groups and movements that differed wildly and argued fiercely about artistic practice and theoretical principles? Influential commentators have expended considerable energy attempting retroactively to identify more or less abstract impulses underlying the extraordinary variety of ideas competing and clashing among self-identified avant-gardist practitioners, yet recent scholars have been more sceptical.² Why should

¹ Klaus von Beyme, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden: Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1905–1955* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), p. 21. Translations into English are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

² By far the most influential such attempt is Peter Bürger’s formulation of the avant-garde as the self-critique of the ‘institution of art’ and the concomitant attempt to ‘merge art with life’; see Peter Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1974]). Raymond Williams presents a similar image of ‘successive formations which challenged not only the art institutions but the institution of Art, or Literature, itself’; see Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1990), p. 67. Andreas Huyssen defines the avant-garde against modernism more broadly through the former’s open attitude towards popular culture; see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Von Beyme has identified no less than six broad points to be considered when identifying the corpus of the classical avant-garde; see Von Beyme, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden*, pp. 28–30. Sceptics include Paul Wood, who writes that “‘avant-garde’ is a chameleon amongst concepts. It blends into a wide variety of different ways of talking about modern art’ (see his Introduction to *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 9); and Dietrich Scheunemann, who writes that ‘the basic assumption of a unified intention of the avant-garde, i.e., the intention of reintegrating art into the life process, is far too simplistic to serve as a guide to the exciting diversity and complex nature of the manifestations of the avant-garde’ and emphasizes ‘the complex and often contradictory nature of the avant-garde’s manifestations and its theoretical discourses’; see Scheunemann, ‘Preface’, in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 7–11 (p. 9). See also Jonathan P. Eborne and Rita Felski, ‘Introduction’, *New Literary History*, 41.4 (2010), v–xv. Scholars have also challenged the long-standing bias that regards western European (especially French) developments as paradigmatic, introducing even more flexibility into understandings of the avant-garde; see, e.g., Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); and Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, eds, *Decentring the Avant-Garde*

we understand the constant conflicts and quarrels among these movements as expressing a shared attitude or set of values — the culture of the manifesto, the drive to reject, to explore, to innovate, to ‘merge art and life’ — that trumps the conflicts and quarrels themselves? Why should we understand the competitive drive, the drive to ‘overcome’ and ‘outdo’ one another, as producing a coherent ‘Project Avant-Garde’?³ Why should we overlook the conspicuous contradictions in principles and ideals among these groups? Why, to take a particularly stark example, should the stern hyper-rationalism of a functionalist building and the irreverent irrationalism of a Dadaist performance strike so many as heralds of a similar spirit?

Few thinkers in the interwar avant-garde confronted these questions as directly as did the Czech avant-garde theorist, artist, and designer Karel Teige (1900–1951). Nowadays his name is familiar primarily to aficionados of the central European interwar avant-garde, but in the 1920s and 1930s Teige was a figure of international stature on the European cultural left. Teige was at various times a close interlocutor of F. T. Marinetti, Le Corbusier, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Sigfried Giedion, Adolf Behne, Mosei Ginzburg, Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer, and was among the earliest proponents of artists such as Man Ray and Charlie Chaplin. It has justifiably been claimed that ‘of all the networked figures in the inter-war avant-garde, Karel Teige was one of the most well connected’.⁴ Exceptionally well informed about contemporary cultural developments across Europe, Teige appears to have had an eidetic memory allowing him to retain astonishing amounts of information; László Moholy-Nagy called him ‘the most informed citizen of Europe’.⁵ Teige, whom another commentator has called ‘one of the most attractive personalities in the history of European modernism’, was among the first to appreciate the enormous significance that mass culture, from film to jazz to pulp fiction to sporting events, held for avant-garde production.⁶ Finally, he wrote about an extraordinary range of avant-garde activities, ranging across visual arts, architecture, new technologies and media (film in particular), literature, typography, theatre, and more. While his interests were diverse, Teige remained a stringently logical thinker whose interventions even in ephemeral cultural-political debates presupposed a synthesizing theory of avant-garde production.

(Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).

3 See Walter Fähnders, *Avant-Garde und Moderne, 1890–1933* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998), p. 123.

4 Matthew S. Witkovsky, ‘Karel Teige: Construction, Poetry, and Jazz’, in *Avant-Garde Art in Everyday Life: Early-Twentieth-Century European Modernism*, ed. by Matthew S. Witkovsky (Chicago, IL: Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 99–117 (p. 100).

5 The architect Karel Honzík claimed that if one gave a random page number in a book Teige had read he could recite the page word for word; see Karel Honzík, *Ze života avantgardy* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1963), p. 53. This may well be an exaggeration, but most accounts of the time agree that Teige would often recite from memory long passages in French from Baudelaire, Apollinaire, and other poets. (Vítězslav Nezval even wrote a poem about this.) The Moholy-Nagy quotation is cited (without attribution) in Rea Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Daniel Morgan and Stephan von Pohl (Prague: KANT, 2018), p. 17.

6 Jean-Louis Cohen, ‘Introduction’, in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 1–55 (p. 2).

Teige's significance both as theorist and as graphic artist and designer inheres in his ambition to articulate this 'integrity of the avant-garde'. Jiří Brabec, one of the editors of Teige's works and one of his most important commentators, has described Teige's pursuit of 'an integrated conception of modern creativity, which he managed by means of a thorough knowledge of specific, individual disciplines as something unified, not broken down into hermetically sealed compartments'.⁷ One fundamental feature of Teige's ambition, therefore, of his 'will to the integral',⁸ was belief in what one can call medial holism: the conviction that the various artistic media and disciplines simply expressed different facets of a single, integrated avant-gardist project. Like few other thinkers of the time, Teige directly confronted the daunting task of articulating an over-arching theoretical framework for the disparate media and disciplines of 1920s and 1930s avant-garde culture. While this notion has clear roots in late nineteenth-century conceptions of synaesthesia, Teige's medial holism had materialist rather than symbolist foundations.⁹ In his effort to develop an interdisciplinary 'unified field theory' of avant-garde practices Teige spoke forcefully for deeper conceptual ambitions widely presumed, yet rarely articulated, among his contemporaries.¹⁰

Like many comparable figures Teige was a confirmed Marxist and believed that the avant-gardist project required political commitment; for this reason he was convinced that his positions on cultural and aesthetic questions presupposed moral integrity as well and provided a basis for sweeping reform that would build a more

7 Jiří Brabec, 'Karel Teige', in Jiří Brabec, *Pansvůl ideologie a moc literatury: Studie, kritiky, portréty (1991–2008)* (Prague: Akropolis, 2009), pp. 246–57 (p. 248). Brabec notes the importance of the terms 'integrity' and 'integration' in Teige's own writing; *ibid.*, p. 254.

8 Jan Wiendl, *Hledači krásy a řádu: Studie a skici k české literatuře 20. století* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova–Filozofická fakulta, 2014), p. 42.

9 Charles Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondances' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) represents the *locus classicus* for synaesthesia in the Symbolist mode, and Stéphane Mallarmé and Wassily Kandinsky are two further well-known sources. Josef Vojvodík also points to two major Czech sources for this aspect of Teige's thought: the critic F. X. Šalda (1867–1937), discussed in more detail in following chapters, and the leading Czech Symbolist poet Otokar Březina (1868–1929); see Josef Vojvodík, 'The Czech Avant-Garde: Evolution, Groupings, Transformations, Theories, Programmes, Techniques', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art, 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 15–64 (pp. 23–24). While Teige explicitly acknowledged the influence of these major figures of the Czech *fin de siècle* on the post-war avant-garde, he signalled his scepticism towards Symbolist synaesthesia as early as 1920; see Karel Teige, 'Novým směrem' [In a new direction] (1921), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 90–96 (p. 90).

10 What I am calling Teige's 'unified field theory' of the avant-garde emerged in a crucial phase of both diversification and consolidation within the European avant-garde. As Timothy Benson has pointed out, the early twenties saw a range of new inflections in avant-garde practice come into prominence, especially among the new central European nations. This explosion of national variations both confirmed the existence of a broad international consensus behind avant-garde culture and simultaneously threatened to fragment into a mosaic of particular visions. Thus the urgency of shoring up an 'intentional community' through the notion of an 'international style' uniting disparate avant-garde activities became increasingly apparent. See Timothy O. Benson, 'Exchange and Transformation: The Internationalization of the Avant-Garde[s] in Central Europe', in *Central European Avant-Gardes*, ed. by Benson, pp. 34–67 (p. 49).

just society. Equating artistic with political avant-gardes was hardly unusual, of course, but the conceptual ambition of Teige's unified field theory goes beyond this common, if often vaguely understood, linkage of aesthetics and politics.¹¹

Teige's commitment to Marxism led him both to some of his central insights and, with hindsight, to some uncomfortable positions. He remained largely celebratory of the Soviet project until well into the 1930s, but this was never out of opportunism: he firmly believed in the ideal until the reality became impossible to overlook. Once he did recognize that reality, he did not shy away from criticism, though this came at considerable personal cost. Indeed, central to Teige's personal integrity was that he largely practised what he preached. Many of his convictions, such as those regarding the housing form he came to call 'the minimum dwelling', struck even his intellectual allies as strict and extreme; yet when he reconstructed his family home in 1927, and later when he and his sister sold that house and constructed a free-standing villa in 1938, he incorporated on a smaller scale the principles of collective housing he propagated publicly, with separate, modest 'accommodation cells' — the Czech term he used (*buňky*) denotes biological cells, not prison cells — for his life-partner Josefa Nevařilová (1900–1951) and himself (with slightly less drastic arrangements for his mother and his sister).¹² Even Teige's fiercest contemporary critics — and he had many — generally granted the strong moral integrity of his own character.¹³ This is evident even in the relentless critical eye with which he regarded his own early efforts as a painter and graphic artist. For a talented teenager who had already achieved some striking successes (publishing artworks in Franz Pfemfert's leading Berlin Expressionist journal *Die Aktion*, for example) to admit to himself so early on that his talent was not equal to his aspirations is noteworthy; yet such clear-sightedness led Teige quickly to focus on avant-garde theory over production. At age nineteen, for example, he wrote in his diary:

While I know my own inadequacies well enough I don't see the path away from them and don't know where I should go to learn. With the reverse fate of Wilhelm Meister I seem perhaps to be completing my *Wanderjahre* but do not know how to begin my *Lehrjahre*! [...] But [there is] another desperately serious voice that grows ever stronger (at least I remember that last year it was barely audible) which does not want to experiment but wants to seek the law and logic of graphic production [*zákon a výtvarnou logiku*].

11 Originally a military term, 'avant-garde' was used as a social and political metaphor before being applied to the arts in the mid-nineteenth century. On the historical interconnections between the 'two avant-gardes', see for example Von Beyme, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden*, pp. 31–32; Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 100–16; and Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 8–12.

12 See Rostislav Švácha, 'Teige jako inspirátor moderní architektury — Teige jako stavebník', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, ed. by Karel Srp and Michal Bregant (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1994), pp. 81–95. Teige, who never married and never had children, had a deep-rooted antagonism to the institution of marriage and held to the notion of committed yet open relationships; see Karel Srp, 'Karel Teige in the Thirties: Projecting Dialectics', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 256–91 (p. 266).

13 For examples see Brabec, 'Karel Teige', p. 247.

He goes on to state that artistic activity ‘only becomes creative through becoming conscious’ — the creed of the theorist.¹⁴

The tension between Teige’s conceptual rigour, which to many of his contemporaries (and later interpreters) could appear as dogmatism, and the effusive enthusiasm and poetic freedom of his thought, remained with him throughout his life. In the 1930s Teige became one of the most significant theorists of Surrealism, understanding it as the liberation of poetic and erotic drives, and in the 1920s he had been the main formulator of the exuberant ‘modernolatry’ of Poetism, an original movement developed by the Czech avant-garde; yet Teige also became renowned internationally for the severity of his Constructivist rationalism. Le Corbusier, who during a famous polemical exchange over his Mundaneum project in 1929 charged Teige with applying ‘police measures’ to creative activity, reproached Teige for speaking in a way ‘that contradicts your thought and suggests the opposite of what you really are: a poet’.¹⁵ The blend of severity and poetry in Teige’s thought is evident in a striking passage from his diary, reflecting on his 1925 visit to the dockyards of Leningrad yet reminding him of earlier travels to Marseilles:

I particularly love southern harbours: clear and sunny, the wide azure-blue of sea and sky, and the black, white, and red forms of ships — it is the purest beauty I know of. I have often thought about why the sea is for me the symbol of clarity, beauty, and harmony, with its rhythmic waves (the most geometrical of natural phenomena), and about why mountains repel me. The Alps interest me as a tourist and I would have nothing against getting to know them better than I do, yet mountains seem somehow frantic, agitated, and thus not beautiful. Perhaps there truly are two types of temperament: those who love the sea and those who love mountain ranges. The former are classical, the latter Romantic megalomaniacs.¹⁶

The *enfant terrible* of strict avant-gardist ‘police measures’ was also the lover of natural beauty; Teige the iconoclast was also Teige the classicist. It is telling that this paean to the southern sea was inspired by Teige’s exuberant response to the ‘majestic, expansive, sublimely bleak’ landscape of icy waters, storage silos, cranes and cooling stations at a far northern Soviet dockyard.¹⁷

The deeper conceptual ambitions Teige pursued are challenging to pin down, for they lead in various directions away from the specifics of his activities and into the history of modernist aesthetics and social philosophy. These ambitions can be approached, however, through a terse quotation from a far more famous theorist of that time. In *The Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin wrote: ‘To encompass both Breton and Le Corbusier — that would mean drawing the spirit of contemporary France

14 Karel Teige, *Deníky* [Diaries], 1912–1925, ed. by Jan Wiendl and Tereza Sudzinová (Prague: Akropolis, 2022), pp. 530–32 (entry dated 20 August 1919). Teige’s early diaries are full of similar self-condemnation of his artistic efforts.

15 Le Corbusier, ‘In Defense of Architecture’, trans. by Nancy Bray, André Lessard, Alan Levitt, and George Baird, *Oppositions*, 4 (1974), 93–106 (pp. 94 and 93). The important ‘Mundaneum polemic’ will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

16 Teige, *Deníky*, p. 674 (entry dated 10 November 1925).

17 Ibid., p. 673.

like a bow, with which knowledge shoots the moment in the heart'.¹⁸ If one expands Benjamin's meaning to encompass not just France but European modernist culture as a whole, then this describes Teige's ambition precisely. (Indeed, André Breton and Le Corbusier were two figures with whom Teige had a particularly intense personal involvement.) On the surface, Benjamin's juxtaposition of Breton and Le Corbusier can be understood as akin to Teige's medial holism: the ambition to bring the text- and image-based work of Breton and the Surrealists on the one hand, and the spatially and structurally based work of Le Corbusier and the Constructivists on the other, under a common understanding. But lurking within Benjamin's juxtaposition are deeper tensions underlying progressive avant-garde culture: between freedom and discipline as mutually reinforcing ideals, between imagination and analysis as mental aptitudes, and between exploration of the irrational and strict adherence to rationality. The attempt to think through and harmonize these and related tensions drives Teige's work from the early 1920s until at least the outbreak of the Second World War. Sceptical observers both at the time and afterwards have regarded these conceptual tensions as straightforward contradictions or antinomies, and there is no doubt that Teige's attempt to envisage a conceptually integrated avant-garde remains riven by ambiguity and paradox. But however one evaluates Teige's ultimate success in these endeavours, his formulations have a value that retrospective conceptions by historians of the avant-garde do not, for they express the understanding of a figure actively involved in these developments and trying to make sense of their diversity, fecundity, and heterogeneity.

The drive to *integrate* is more fundamental to Teige's project than the various divisions and dualisms he identified. Teige was unique in his ambition to show that seemingly divergent aesthetic impulses such as abstraction, fragmentation, and anti-rationalism on the one hand, and functionalism, mass media, and anti-historicism on the other, all share a common foundation. By uncovering this foundation he wished to expedite the 'fusion of creative work with the most present time' and thus an 'integration with the era'.¹⁹ His aim, no less than Benjamin's, was to 'shoot the moment in the heart': to bring together the different impulses of the modern moment into a coherent whole and thereby delineate the underlying historical identity of the present. Teige thus demonstrates that the avant-garde aesthetics of fragmentation and discontinuity is entirely compatible with a *holistic* drive that must not be dismissed as merely nostalgic or regressive. Here lies the uncommon importance of his work for modernist studies.

The present book explores Teige's project on several registers. The first register encompasses a basic historical account of Teige's intellectual and creative career, as well as the context of the interwar Czechoslovak and international cultural

18 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 459; *Das Passagen-Werk*, in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–89), v, 573.

19 Oleg Sus, 'Totožnost člověka uprostřed víru: První studie o avantgardním antropologismu: Poetistický modus vivendi', in Oleg Sus, *Estetické problémy pod napětím: Meziválečná avantgarda, surrealismus, levice* (Prague: Jůza and Jůzová, 1992), pp. 35–47 (p. 38).

dynamics in which he operated. This account ends with the outbreak of the Second World War; while Teige remained active up until his death, the post-war circumstances were fundamentally different from the interwar period, during which Teige's most characteristic work emerged. My account also considers how Teige's theoretical texts, which were the primary source of his extraordinary influence in interwar Czechoslovakia and beyond, relate to his own activities as a visual artist, graphic designer, and typographer. Second, points of resonance and dissonance must be examined between Teige's positions and those of more familiar intellectuals and alliances on the contemporary Left in central Europe, such as the semiotics of Jan Mukařovský, Roman Jakobson and Prague School Structuralism; the philosophically dense articulation of a critical socialist realism that Georg Lukács undertook; and the dissections of modern mass culture associated with Frankfurt School thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno and in particular Walter Benjamin — the latter of whom figures prominently in Part IV of this book. Third, the dynamics that drove Teige's thought are grounded in a philosophical discourse that in many respects extends back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to foundational aesthetic formulations by philosophers such as Herder, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Since Teige was an avowedly Marxist thinker, philosophical and aesthetic questions central to the Marxist traditions play a major role as well. The overlay of these three registers — the biographical, the theoretical, and the philosophical — is what the unusual subtitle of this book expresses. This book provides an 'intellectual biography' of an individual, Teige, whose accomplishment has been obscured by the vagaries of academic reception and who deserves greater recognition among students of the interwar European avant-garde. But it also traces the 'conceptual biography' of a mode of thought that was widely shared among Teige's contemporaries and that is rooted in philosophical impulses at the heart of modern aesthetics. Teige's personal ambition was also a fundamental modernist ambition.²⁰

This study thus does not take the standard form of a monograph systematically presenting the life and work of an underappreciated historical figure.²¹ Rather, I

20 It has become customary for studies such as this to proffer a definition of how to distinguish the avant-garde from modernism more broadly. I shall forego this ritual, primarily because Teige himself used the terms largely as synonyms (also at times speaking simply of 'the new art'). While most of his reference points were 'Isms' — Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Purism, Constructivism, Surrealism — that fall within what is commonly understood as the 'historical avant-garde' (a term first popularized by Bürger), Teige had no qualms about discussing in comparable ways figures such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Proust, or Joyce, who most commentators would label modernists rather than avant-gardists. See, for example, 'Od romantismu k dadaismu' [From Romanticism to Dada], in Karel Teige, *Svět, který voní* [The Sweetly Scented World] (Prague: Odeon, 1930; facsimile reprint Prague: Akropolis, 2004), pp. 7–68 (esp. pp. 16–34). As Raymond Williams has noted: 'It is not easy to make simple distinctions between "Modernism" and the "avant-garde", especially as many uses of these labels are retrospective'; Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 51. Astradur Eysteinnsson, who considers for example Joyce and Kafka to be 'avant-garde' as much as 'modernist', adopts the anodyne, though not incontestable, formulation that 'when used in conjunction with modernism, "avant-garde" tends to signify the more radical, norm-breaking aspects of modernism'; Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 177–78.

21 For such a monograph see Michalová's excellent and exhaustively researched *Karel Teige: Captain*

treat Teige's thought as a window onto deeper dynamics within the aesthetics of modernism. A significant characteristic of Teige is the way he stands as a typical thinker of his time: 'typical' in the sense of a figure who embodies with particular clarity the dynamics and dilemmas of an era.²² Attention to Teige's intellectual development therefore allows one to observe broader dynamics at work within interwar modernist culture without getting too caught up in generalizations about 'the avant-garde', which easily reduce to realist abstractions (the avant-garde 'is' A, B, and C) or dubious anthropomorphism (the avant-garde 'believes' X, Y, and Z). Teige himself did believe that the avant-garde indisputably 'was' something, but when we focus on the beliefs of this particular thinker, and understand him as typical in the sense above, we are on more solid ground than if we attempt to extract or synthesize a set of coherent principles from an amorphous grouping of individuals, artworks, texts, and similar evidence. Conversely, understanding Teige as a typical figure allows discussion of his career to be more than just microhistory of a less studied segment of the European avant-garde. The details have indicative value for larger questions and concerns. The following chapters present a fair amount of detail about Czechoslovak modernist culture, and generally in chronological form, but do so selectively and not as an end in itself. This book is not a comprehensive history of Czechoslovak left-wing modernism focused on the figure of Teige.²³ My interest lies instead in the remarkable degree to which polemics and debates in which Teige engaged — polemics often initiated by personal animosities, passing alliances, or political exigencies within interwar Czechoslovak culture — can be understood to reflect subterranean tensions in the wider avant-garde and modernist landscape. The boundary between the personal and the philosophical, between the historically specific and the conceptually abstract, will thus remain porous.

Part I of this book addresses the context of Teige's thought along the three registers of 'integrity' structuring my argument. Chapter One presents a fairly detailed historical overview of Teige's career in the interwar period. Chapter Two then briefly sketches some theoretical frameworks (the question of 'dualisms') that help make sense of that historical trajectory, before turning to the underlying philosophical questions I see motivating Teige's project: the slippery questions of 'holism' and of 'historicism' and 'historical integrity', which I argue are fundamental to

of the Avant-Garde. Originally published as *Karel Teige: Kapitán avantgardy* (Prague: KANT, 2016).

22 Cohen calls Teige 'a perfect specimen of a *passeur*, a communicator of ideas and forms'; Cohen 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, p. 7.

23 Jan Wiendl (among others) has noted that Czechoslovak literary historiography has long privileged left-wing groups and movements and made them central to its modernist and avant-gardist canons, thus marginalizing other manifestations such as so-called Catholic Modernism; see Wiendl, *Hledači krásy a řádu*, p. 115. This is due not only to the predominance of orthodox Marxist interpretations between 1948 and 1989, but also to the stigmatization and suppression of much of the left-wing avant-garde by precisely such Marxist orthodoxy in the 1950s in particular, which allowed the recovery of this avant-garde (and the work of Teige in particular, which had been proscribed for a decade after his death) by scholars in the 1960s to function as a gesture of resistance against Stalinist cultural orthodoxy. One of the first important post-1989 studies expanding the historical field of Czechoslovak modernism beyond this left-wing bias was Martin C. Putna, *Česká katolická moderna v evropském kontextu* (Prague: Torst, 1998).

understanding the ambitions and paradoxes not just of Teige's career, but of the interwar avant-garde as a whole. The chapters comprising Parts II and III examine important episodes, debates, and questions in Teige's work during the 1920s and 1930s, respectively. Between these parts comes a short intermezzo chapter, in which I present close interpretations of a few of Teige's more significant graphic productions, specifically 'picture-poems' (a genre in many ways unique to the Czech avant-garde). Finally, in Part IV I pursue a comparative analysis of Teige's presuppositions and Walter Benjamin's late work, in particular the essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' and sections of *The Arcades Project*. Precisely those questions regarding historicism (a key term also in Benjamin's later writings), historical integrity, holism, and the 'heart of the present moment' highlighted in the early chapters of the book provide a valuable point of contrast with the project of Benjamin's later work. Aspects of Benjamin's work that have appeared to many commentators as idiosyncratic or nostalgic, I argue, are best understood as responses to conceptual conundrums that Teige, as a 'typical' thinker of his time, helps clarify.

Only rarely did Teige reflect openly on how 'shooting the heart of the present moment' moves from mere tracking of artistic fashion to an encounter with historical integrity, yet the question weighed on him from a young age. At age eighteen, likely thinking of Baudelaire's consideration in 'The Painter of Modern Life' of the interrelation of fashion and the eternal, Teige reflected on 'the question of so-called (at least that's what I call it) "seasonality" [sezonnosti] [...] This is a particular feature of a picture that speaks precisely and only to its own season [...]. So how does it happen that the seasonality of long-dead seasons can still speak to us [...], that the seasonality of Mozart minuets and his amusing minor works and here and there also of Beethoven — how do these still speak to us?'²⁴ Few thinkers of the interwar period were as knowledgeable of and devoted to following the churn of avant-garde trends, the incessant self-immolation and reinvention that was a structural feature of the logic of the avant-garde. Yet few thinkers were as focused as he was on what underlay that churn and transformed it from merely a jumble of seasonal fashions to a coherent expression of historical integrity — on the mystery that binds the present moment to an expression that reaches beyond its season and speaks into the future.

24 Teige, *Deníky*, p. 495 (diary entry dated 26 December 1918). In his diary entry for 5 December 1917 Teige notes his purchase of Baudelaire's *Romantic Art* (ibid., p. 390), which includes 'The Painter of Modern Life'.

PART I



Contexts



FIG. 1.1. Karel Teige in 1927. Private collection

CHAPTER 1



Karel Teige: A Brief Intellectual Biography

Teige was born just a few weeks before the twentieth century, on 13 December 1900. He died fifty-one years later, just past the century's mid-point. His lifetime thus coincides almost exactly with the most turbulent half-century in modern European history. The world he was born into and the world in which he died were utterly different. He grew up in a comfortable bourgeois household in central Prague. His father was a historian who held the position of official archivist of the city, and this likely helped motivate Teige to study history of art at Prague University, where he showed a consistent interest in medieval art and Old Masters, as well as modern art. The Prague Teige grew up in was a provincial capital, and Bohemia was one of the 'crown lands', within the Habsburg Empire, also called Austria-Hungary. When Teige died in 1951 Prague was the capital of Czechoslovakia, which had been an independent state for over three decades, though it had undergone partition and occupation by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945, and then become a Soviet satellite state after the 'Victorious February' of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1948. By 1951 Czechoslovakia was immersed in show trials modelled on Stalin's purges, which Teige and a few others had had the courage to denounce in the 1930s.¹ Teige's friend and associate, the philosopher and Surrealist Závěš Kalandra (1902–1950), was among those executed in the course of these show trials, and there was solid reason for Teige to fear he could meet a similar fate.² Communist

1 See, for example, 'Moskevský proces' [The Moscow Trial] (1936) and *Surrealismus proti proudu* [Surrealism Against the Current] (1938), in *Výbor z díla*, ed. by Jiří Brabec, Vratislav Effenberger, Květoslav Chvátík, and Robert Kalivoda, 3 vols (Prague: Československý/Český spisovatel, 1966–94), II, 335–49 and 469–541 respectively.

2 See Rea Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Daniel Morgan and Stephan von Pohl (Prague: KANT, 2018), pp. 505–07. On Kalandra, an important figure who awaits serious attention in English-language scholarship, see Jiří Brabec, 'Doslov' [Afterword] to Závěš Kalandra, *Intelektuál a revoluce*, ed. by Jiří Brabec (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1994), pp. 368–407; and 'Závěš Kalandra', in Jiří Brabec, *Pansvůl ideologie a moc literatury: Studie, kritiky, portréty (1991–2008)* (Prague: Akropolis, 2009), pp. 261–67. Kalandra had offended in the mid-1930s through articles such as 'Stalin se vypořádal se starými bolševiky' [Stalin Has Dealt with the Old Bolsheviks], 'Odhalené tajemství moskevského procesu' [The Secret of the Moscow Trial Revealed], 'Druhý moskevský proces' [The Second Moscow Trial], 'K druhému moskevskému procesu' [On the Second Moscow Trial], and 'Stalin svým byrokratům' [Stalin to his Bureaucrats], in *Intelektuál a revoluce*, pp. 216–58. English-language readers are most likely to have encountered Kalandra's name through the bitter

cultural apparatchiks made of Teige a highly visible pariah, portraying him as the embodiment of ‘decadent’ bourgeois modernism and even coining the term ‘Teige-ese’ (*teigovština*) to designate a cultural vocabulary they aimed to smear and eliminate as an infantile disorder.³ Teige saw clearly that the world in which he had once flourished had vanished irrevocably after the war. In the Autumn of 1948, half a year after ‘Victorious February’, Teige wrote a letter to a friend saying:

life and all its highest values become just desolate nonsense if the end of the world is approaching — the end of *one* world [...]. You wrote to me not long ago that you don’t believe that the world could drown in idiocy — do you really not believe that?? I think it is just a matter of time, and not even very long.

Just a few months earlier he had written to the same friend:

I am preparing to write a book and I want to finish it whatever it takes, and as soon as possible. It’s important to me that it’s not a bad book because it will likely be my *last* book. [...] Please don’t ask why, but that’s how it is. Even the historical situation makes it impossible for me to think beyond the boundary of 1951.

On 1 October 1951, Teige died of a heart attack.⁴

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Teige’s intellectual career is thus intimately bound to the cultural development of the first Republic of Czechoslovakia during the interwar period. Established right at the end of the First World War in October 1918, after the collapse of the

episode describing his execution in Milan Kundera’s novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. by Aaron Ascher (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), pp. 92–95.

3 See Mojmir Grygar, ‘Teigovština: Trocistická agentura v naší kultuře’ [Teige-ese: A Trotskyite Agency in our Culture], in *Tvorba*, 20.42–44 (1951), 1008–10, 1036–38, and 1060–62. Extensive passages from this attack are translated in Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 527–32. Teige’s vilification is described, with considerable animus, by Jaromír Hořec, *Doba ortelů* (Brno: Scholaris, 1992), pp. 97 and 103–05; and Václav Černý, *Paměti, 1945–1972*, 2nd edn (Brno: Atlantis, 1992), pp. 251–52. Symptomatic in this context is the depressing exchange of letters between Teige and Ladislav Štoll in 1950, reproduced in *Výbor*, III, 581–93, in which Teige attempted retroactively to justify his pre-war positions. Štoll (1902–1981) had collaborated with Teige in the group Levá fronta [Left Front] in the 1930s, but by the 1950s had become a leading cultural ideologue for the Communist Party and initiated the official denunciatory line against Teige at the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union conference in January 1950. For a nuanced account of their relation, see Shawn Clybor, ‘Socialist (Sur)Realism: Karel Teige, Ladislav Štoll, and the Politics of Communist Culture in Czechoslovakia’, *History of Communism in Europe*, 2 (2011), 143–67.

4 Letters to Marie Pospíšilová dated 7 September and 5 July 1948, quoted in *Analogon*, 1 (1969), 3 and 69. For some time after Teige’s death the rumour circulated (repeated by André Breton among others) that he had committed suicide in the face of official hounding, but cf. Vratislav Effenberger, ‘Ediční poznámka’, in Karel Teige, *Vývojové proměny v umění* (Prague: Nakladatelství československých výtvarných umělců, 1966), p. 336 and Jaroslav Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa*, 2nd edn (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1992), p. 509. At the time of his death Teige, who opposed conventional ‘bourgeois’ models for the family, was involved in intimate relationships with two women; he was convinced this open arrangement could be made harmonious for all but it is not clear whether that was true. Both his long-term partner Jožka Nevařilová and another partner Eva Ebertová committed suicide in the days following Teige’s death; see Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa*, pp. 592–93; and Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 288–90 and 524–27.

Habsburg military front which brought an end to Europe's longest lasting imperial dynasty, the First Republic itself ended twenty years later through one of Hitler's earliest moves to establish his own European empire. For most of those two decades, between 1918 and 1935, Czechoslovakia was presided over by its 'President-Liberator' (*Prezident Osvoboditel*), Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), a former professor of sociology and philosophy who, in exile primarily in England, the United States, and Russia during the war, had become the central figure shoring up international support for an independent Czechoslovakia, ultimately leveraging Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of political self-determination for the varied peoples living within the German, Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires. Masaryk's polished international image as a cultured and enlightened politician — a sort of modern, democratic version of Plato's philosopher-king — combined with the relative industrial and economic strength of the new state to produce an often romanticized notion of the First Republic as an island of democracy and prosperity in a period when dark forces were pushing central Europe inexorably towards fascism. The truth, naturally, was more complicated. Throughout its existence Masaryk's republic struggled to contain the centrifugal forces of a fractious political scene, as well as to balance the power of the centralized state against the claims and grievances of a range of significant ethnic minorities.⁵

Teige had a conflicted relationship to this new state: he was both a vibrant product of First Republic democratic culture as well as one of its unrelenting critics.⁶ The avant-gardist revolutionary rhetoric to which Teige, and most of the left-wing Czechoslovak avant-garde that emerged in late 1920, was so committed understood itself as cosmopolitan and internationalist yet echoed, often unintentionally, the patriotic political discourse that cast the new Czechoslovak Republic as the outcome of a modern, democratic revolution against the obsolete, feudal Habsburg state.⁷ But any initial shared enthusiasm for independence quickly gave

5 See Peter Bugge, 'Czech Democracy 1918–1938: Paragon or Parody?', in *Bohemia*, 7.1 (2006/07), 3–28. Major critical histories of the period in Czech are Antonín Klimek, *Boj o hrad*, 2 vols (Prague: Tomáš Krsek, 2017 [1996]); Antonín Klimek, *Velké dějiny země České koruny*, vols 13 (1918–1929) and 14 (1929–1938) (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2000 and 2002); Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky, 1918–1938*, 3 vols (Prague: Libri, 2000–18) (see in particular the overview in III, 636–49); Jiří Kovtun, *Republika v nebezpečném světě: Éra prezidenta Masaryka, 1918–1935* (Prague: Torst, 2005); and Jiří Kovtun, *Republika v obležení: První éra prezidenta Beneše, 1935–1938* (Prague: Torst, 2016). In English see Josef Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and the revisionist accounts in Mary Heimann, *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); and Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: Czechoslovak Myth and Propaganda, 1914–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). On tensions between conceptions of democracy and equality, especially gender equality, in the First Republic and beyond, see Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

6 Eric Dluhoš describes the relation of the interwar avant-garde to the Czechoslovak Republic as 'loyal opposition in the new political culture of a well-functioning liberal democracy'; Eric Dluhoš, 'Karel Teige a nezdár levé avantgardy', in *Umění*, 43.1–2 (1995), 9–17 (p. 9).

7 The interim National Assembly set up in November 1918, for example, was commonly referred to as the 'Revolutionary National Assembly', with many of its members styling themselves as revolutionaries. Masaryk himself titled his 1925 book about his political activities during the War

way to increasingly bitter factionalism, in particular on the Left. The deepening social polarization was especially visible amongst the emerging avant-garde, in which radical, internationalist, often pro-Soviet social and cultural forces became stridently critical of Masaryk's 'bourgeois' state.⁸ Teige's own ambivalence towards the emerging republic is already evident in his diary entries from the days shortly after the declaration of independence from Austria-Hungary. On 30 October 1918, two days after the declaration, he wrote of his own engagement with these historic events as follows:

What was my participation — well, what would it be? I was thrilled, I walked through the streets and sang the hymns, drunk with both enthusiasm and cognac. Those were powerful impressions of belonging with the masses, but in the end one doesn't dissolve entirely into the masses. It bothers me that in some way I still feel isolated. On some level I feel that it is not all so harmonious — and I really can't agree with everything, much as I might wish to. After all not even the form of the state has been decided yet — it's not yet clear, though it almost is, that we'll have a republic. Obviously I don't want anything to do with any sort of monarchy. I would betray and undermine that just as I did the previous, hated Austria. But any sort of *non*-socialist republic is also unacceptable. A republic without socialism is truly no better than despotism.⁹

The intermingling of enthusiasm with critical distance here is striking. Also striking is how the young Teige (who just a few months earlier had helped organize a major student strike against the Habsburg authorities) gave only conditional support to the new republic, and was acutely aware it could fall short of his revolutionary ambitions. His emotions were conflicted in those early months: upon the triumphal return of T. G. Masaryk to Prague in December of 1918 Teige noted in his diary his enthusiasm at the celebrations, the sounds, and the banners, even referring to 'our papa Masaryk, heir of Chelčický' ('náš tatíček Masaryk, dědic Chelčického'), invoking a phrase that would become central to the loyalist Masaryk mythology; yet eight months later he wrote furiously of the 'atrociously reactionary, knavish and chauvinist "democratic" Czechoslovak republic, whose fall will be as significant for the progress of socialism as was the fall of Prussia'.¹⁰

With this marked revolutionary rhetoric Teige and the other artists, writers, and architects who entered the avant-garde cultural scene at the beginning of the 1920s understood themselves as embarking on a historic 'new beginning' and 'new direction' after the war. In one of Teige's first significant publications, a short programmatic text from late 1920, he wrote: 'If we are to judge by the ongoing

World Revolution (Světová revoluce); see Klimek, *Boj o hrad*, 1, 20–21.

8 Late 1920 brought open and at times violent conflict between working-class demonstrators and the police, and between the moderate Social Democrats (who had the largest mandate in the new state) and its radical wing, which would break away and found the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in May 1921. See Kárník, *České země*, 1, 135–39 and 142–47.

9 Karel Teige, *Deníky, 1912–1925*, ed. by Jan Wiendl and Tereza Sudzinová (Prague: Akropolis, 2022), p. 483 (diary entry dated 30 October 1918).

10 Teige, *Deníky*, pp. 493 and 528 (diary entries dated 21 December 1918 and 8 August 1919). Petr Chelčický (c. 1380–c. 1460) was a radical theologian and social theorist whose most famous work, *Siet' viery pravé* [The Net of True Faith] (c. 1440) was greatly admired by Tolstoy.

and ever increasing crises in all areas of work then there can be no doubt that we have stood on the dividing line between two worlds. And that the solution for this is Revolution'.¹¹ One year later he expressed the situation even more dramatically:

The present, heated and stormy, is a moment when everywhere, and thus in art too, the abyss widens between the old and new worlds, a deep abyss, a fundamental and all-encompassing crisis of the sort that irreversibly and catastrophically alters the flow of history so as to sharply change the course of time. This is no conflict between two 'isms' or a mere reactive ferment, the conflict between two generations. The conflict is more fundamental: a contrast between two great cultural epochs.¹²

Such rhetoric was common across Europe at that time, fuelled at times by the horror of the war and at times by inspiration from developments in the young Soviet Union. (And while this rhetoric reflected contemporary events, it also clearly echoed the self-understanding of modernism since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and indeed of modernity since the seventeenth century, as initiating a *tabula rasa*.¹³) But in contrast to Germany, just beginning to confront the magnitude of its defeat, or neighbouring Austria and Hungary, facing enormous territorial losses, or even France and Britain, victorious yet socially and economically devastated nonetheless, it was much easier in the newly founded Czechoslovak republic to view this historical break not as decline or uncertainty but in rosy, hopeful tones.¹⁴ The sheer youth of so many of the artists and writers emerging into prominence right after the war (many of them were, like Teige, no older than the new century) reinforced this optimism and lent the moment the feeling of a generational hand-over, at times cast as a 'youthful' modernism displacing senile nationalism, and at other times as a 'mature' cosmopolitanism displacing childish regionalism as the driving force of Czechoslovak culture.

11 Karel Teige, 'Novým směrem' [In a New Direction] (1921), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 1, 90–96 (p. 92).

12 Karel Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti' [The Art of the Present], in *Život II* [Life II], ed. by Jaromír Krejcar (Prague: Výtvarný odbor Umělecké besedy, 1922), pp. 119–32 (p. 132).

13 Stephen Edelston Toulmin describes modernity as beholden to the 'myth of the clean slate'; Stephen Edelston Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 175. Jürgen Habermas writes that 'Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes orientation from the models supplied by another epoch: it has to create its normativity out of itself'; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 7. These formulations go back to a Cartesian impulse: 'The inspiration of [Descartes's] work was the idea of breaking sharply and completely with the past, and constructing a system which borrows nothing from the dead'; J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover, 1952), p. 67.

14 For more on such rhetoric in the Czech context, see Jan Wiendl, 'The New Order of Life and Art', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art, 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 291–310; and Jan Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači: K otázce sepětí řádu umění a života v české poezii první poloviny 20. století* (Prague: Dauphin, 2007), pp. 107–44.

Devětsil: The Passion of the Avant-Garde

The young left-wing Czech avant-garde moved rapidly to contrast its aims to those of the artists and movements that had been most influential in Bohemia before and during the war. Several rival groups of young artists and writers emerged at this time but the one that soon achieved the greatest prominence was called 'Devětsil', a name that, similarly to 'Dada', allowed various interpretations and thus created an aura of ambiguity: it was a name that 'didn't mean anything but said a lot'.¹⁵ Literally 'Devětsil' is the name of a plant, the butterbur, which some members of the group took as an intentionally anti-urban image. Broken into its etymological components (*devět-sil*) the term means 'nine forces', which some contemporary commentators associated with the nine classical Muses (suggestive of the ideal of medial holism), others with a nine-horsepower engine as symbol of the modern technologized world, and others with the nine original members of the group.¹⁶ The group was officially founded on 5 October 1920 and published its first joint proclamation two months later.¹⁷ The majority of founding members were friends who had just completed grammar school (*gymnasium*), and while the first chairperson and likely initiating spirit of Devětsil was the slightly older writer Vladislav Vančura (1891–1942), who would go on to become one of the most significant Czech prose writers of the twentieth century, Teige's energy and talent for defining programmatic positions soon gained him the status of theoretical spokesperson for Devětsil and thus its most visible figure and 'spiritus rector'.¹⁸ Previously Teige had seen himself as an emerging graphic artist, and possibly writer as well. He had had some impressive successes: while still a teenager he had artwork accepted not only by prominent Czech journals but major international outlets as well, such as *Die Aktion*, one of the two main spaces for Expressionism in Germany. Yet his early diaries reveal how his self-critical impulse led him to see his own shortcomings and to analyse them through contextualization with recent cultural developments. Teige's sense of his own failings as artist thus also revealed his early power as critic and theoretician.¹⁹

15 Ivan Suk, 'Začátky Devětsilu' (1931), cited in Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 65.

16 See Adolf Hoffmeister, *Předobrazy* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1962), p. 36; and Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa*, p. 173.

17 'U.S. Devětsil', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlášín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), I, 81–83. Originally published in *Pražské pondělí*, 2.49 (6 December 1920), p. 2. The statement opened with the familiar rhetoric of generational cleft and a new dawn. 'U.S.' stands for 'Umělecký svaz' [Artistic Union], a modifier that soon changed to 'Svaz moderní kultury' [Union for Modern Culture].

18 Otakar Štorch-Marien, *Sladko je žít: Paměti nakladatele I* (Prague: Aventinum, 1992), p. 204. In his diaries Teige discusses how in early summer 1920 he and Vančura were developing the idea to found 'some sort of artistic commune'; Teige's schoolmates Vladimír Štulc (1900–1987) and Karel Vaněk (1900–1960) were soon brought into the planning. See Teige, *Deníky*, p. 571. On Vančura, see Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde* (Prague: Karolinum, 2007).

19 See, for example, Teige's critical reflections on his own artwork in Teige, *Deníky*, pp. 440–44, or this sharp self-condemnation: 'This morning I made an aquarelle that is so miserable I simply couldn't go on. If I continue working this way — well, that's all, folks [*nu sbohem*]. It's not just that

Once Devětsil was founded Teige's obsessive self-reflection turned towards articulating how his generation as a whole differed from its predecessors. Teige wrote at this time: 'We ask no patronage or protection of the preceding Czech generation, [...] which objects to a great deal of what we do, even though, filled with prejudice and intransigence, they have never familiarized themselves with us better. No wonder that understanding and agreement is so difficult to imagine here, when the abyss between both worlds, here as everywhere, deepens every day.'²⁰ Even as a tactical exaggeration this was unfair: Teige's claim in fact appeared in a journal edited by one of those major figures of the preceding generation, as did several of Teige's earliest programmatic texts. Indeed, the very name 'Devětsil' had been either suggested or inspired by the brothers Josef and Karel Čapek, who at that point were establishing international reputations.²¹ (Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.*, famous for coining the term 'robot', had been published in 1920 and would soon become an international literary sensation.) It is true that the relation between Devětsil and its early patrons was marked by mutual caution.²² But far from ignoring Devětsil, established commentators quickly paid considerable attention to the group.²³ Thus the early rhetoric of a generational break masked the reality and awareness that Devětsil stood situated in a particular developmental line. Over the course of the 1920s Teige, with his relentless drive to analyse and systematize cultural developments, became increasingly focused on defining that avant-garde lineage, not only in Czech but also in wider European or indeed global terms.²⁴

I bungled it but that it undermines my faith in the further work I have planned'; *ibid.*, p. 539 (diary entry dated 15 October 1919).

²⁰ Teige, 'Novým směrem', p. 94.

²¹ Adolf Hoffmeister states that the Čapek brothers directly suggested the name Devětsil; see Hoffmeister, *Předobrazy*, p. 34. Ivan Suk, however, claimed that Teige had come up with the name; quoted in Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 65. Jaroslav Seifert combines both stories and claims that the original members were flipping through a newly released book by the Čapek brothers, *The Garden of Krakonoš*, hoping to find a fitting name, and that Teige picked out Devětsil; see Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa*, pp. 173 and 508.

²² Two of Teige's early texts published in different journals edited by established figures were accompanied by editorial commentary expressing critical distance from Teige's position — but they were published nonetheless. See Stanislav Kostka Neumann's addendum to Teige's 'Novým směrem' stating that the journal was publishing it 'willingly and loyally, even though we do not agree with certain details'; Teige, 'Novým směrem', p. 96. Karel Čapek added a more extensive distancing 'note' to Teige's important article 'Images and Fore-Images', published a few months later in *Musaion*, a journal Čapek edited. See Karel Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy' (1921), and Karel Čapek, 'Poznámka', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 97–104.

²³ Devětsil's first evening of public recitations, on 6 February 1921, was well received by several senior reviewers, including Neumann and, more surprisingly, Arne Novák, an academic literary critic who was politically conservative. See Stanislav K. Neumann, 'Devětsil', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 84–86; and Hoffmeister, *Předobrazy*, pp. 41–42.

²⁴ Teige, 'Od romantismu k dadaismu', in Teige, *Svět, který voní* (Prague: Odeon, 1931; facsimile reprint Prague: Akropolis, 2004), pp. 7–68, is one of his more significant explications of this lineage. Daniel Vojtěch states that 'through its performance of discontinuity' the Czech avant-garde of the 1920s 'was hiding many internal connections with the history of modern art and of art more generally'; see Daniel Vojtěch, *Vášeň a ideál: Na křižovatkách moderny* (Prague: Academia, 2008), p. 11. On deeper connections between the Devětsil generation and earlier currents in Czech culture see also Josef Vojvodík, 'The Czech Avant-Garde: Evolution, Groupings, Transformations, Theories,

Of established figures on the Czech cultural scene the most important for Devěšil in its initial phase was without doubt the poet Stanislav Kostka Neumann (1875–1947). Neumann's later development towards extremely orthodox, and often crude, communist formulations, which were eagerly taken up by the Stalinist cultural establishment after 1948, have significantly tarnished his reputation. From roughly 1922 on he became known for increasingly crass denunciations of 'bourgeois intellectuals', and in particular for his 1937 condemnation of André Gide's *Retour de l'URSS* and for his blanket rejection of modernism in general.²⁵ But in 1920 Neumann was a major figure in Czech literature and not yet the dogmatist he would soon become. Beginning his career around the turn of the century as a Decadent poet, Neumann had developed over the 1900s and 1910s through phases as an anarchist and 'Civilist' poet.²⁶ Together with Josef and Karel Čapek he had been a central figure in the joint publication *Almanach na rok 1914* [1914 Almanac], a slim volume of poetry, prose, and illustrations widely regarded as opening a new phase in modern Czech culture, though a phase that would soon be interrupted by the war.²⁷ In 1919 a journal Neumann edited, *Červen* [June], published Karel Čapek's translation of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Zone*, which would have tremendous influence on the development of Czech modernist poetry through its dismantling of Symbolist poetic conventions.²⁸ Neumann had even been one of the first Czech intellectuals to grasp the significance of Franz Kafka, and in another of his journals,

Programmes, Techniques', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 15–64.

25 See S. K. Neumann, *Anti-Gide neboli optimismus bez pověr a ilusí* (Prague: Lidová kultura, 1937). One commentator has written that 'Neumann can claim precedence in introducing us in this period to cultural-political Stalinism in its brutal, anti-cultural form'; see Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945–56* (Prague: Torst, 1998), p. 130. See also Daniela Kolenovská, 'Návrat André Gida', in *Soudobé Dějiny*, 16.1 (2009), 48–68. By the later 1930s Teige and Neumann stood as adversaries, and Neumann was one of the first to wield the phrase *teigovština* (see note 3); see Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu*, p. 478. Teige's opinion of Neumann by that point was positively withering; see Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu*, pp. 478–86.

26 On Neumann's complicated career path see Marta Filipová, *Modernity, History, and Politics in Czech Art* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 88–94. 'Civilism' was a Czech-specific movement that combined a commitment to simple and direct poetic expression, a positive attitude towards modern civilization and technology, and elements of Bergsonian vitalism. Neumann provided one of the first impulses for the movement with his 1913 programmatic text 'At' žije život! [Long live life!], an explicit rejection of his earlier poetic idioms. For an overview, see Vladimír Papoušek, 'Civilist Poetry', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 149–54.

27 See Josef Čapek et al., eds, *Almanach na rok 1914* (Prague: 'Přehled', 1913; facsimile reprint (with commentary) Prague: Akropolis, 2014).

28 See Michal Bauer, 'Zone', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 433–39; Jiří Brabec, '1920: Neklidný rok', in *Dějiny nové moderny: Česká literatura v letech, 1905–1923*, ed. by Vladimír Papoušek (Prague: Academia, 2010), pp. 332–49 (p. 348); Jan Mukařovský, 'Francouzská poesie K. Čapka' [1936], in Jan Mukařovský, *Studie*, ed. by Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič, 2 vols (Brno: Host, 2007), II, 300–04; 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 (2003), 345–66. The young Teige was in contact with Čapek during the completion of this anthology, even lending him certain volumes by Apollinaire and Charles Vildrac; see the diary entries dated 3 and 14 October 1919 (Teige, *Deníky*, pp. 537 and 539).

Kmen [The Tribe], had published the first translation of a text by Kafka into any language.²⁹

Neumann's major influence on the early Devětsil was to guide it towards the credo of 'Proletarian Art'. This movement took primary inspiration from the Soviet Proletkult movement, in particular as formulated by Anatoly Lunacharsky, yet also encompassed impulses from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Czech social poetry.³⁰ Neumann's deepening commitment to Marxism in the immediate post-war years widened the distance between him and his close collaborators from just before and during the war, the Čapeks and the group around the *Almanach na rok 1914*. Indeed the Čapeks, who would go on to become probably the most recognized figures internationally from interwar Czechoslovak culture, were increasingly associated with a centrist, liberal version of modernism, influenced by American Pragmatism and linked politically with President Masaryk (who occasionally attended the well-known 'Pátečníci' Friday evening discussion meetings the Čapeks hosted), in contrast to the more radical, Marxist avant-garde Devětsil represented.³¹ But the emerging Proletarian Art movement generated new alliances as well: most notably with the poet Josef Hora (1891–1945), and with the young members of Devětsil, especially Teige, the poet Jaroslav Seifert (1901–1986), and with the figure who would ultimately become the most celebrated poet of the movement, Jiří Wolker (1900–1924).³² Wolker was not a founding member of Devětsil and indeed his relationship to the group always remained cautious: he only

29 This was Milena Jesenská's Czech translation of 'Der Heizer' [The Stoker], which Neumann described at that time as 'one of the best modern stories in German'. On *Kmen* and Kafka, see Anne Jamison, *Kafka's Other Prague: Writings from the Czechoslovak Republic* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), pp. 50–60. Jesenská (who later married the Devětsil architect Jaromír Krejcar) became a member of Devětsil in 1926.

30 See Thomas G. Winner, *The Czech Avant-Garde Literary Movement Between the World Wars*, ed. by Ondřej Sládek and Michael Heim (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), Chapter 2; Michal Bauer, 'Proletarian Art', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 331–47 (esp. pp. 334–35); Wiendl, 'The New Order of Life and Art'; Zdeněk Pešat, 'Mezi proletářskou poezií a poetismem', in *Česká literatura*, 50.2 (2002), 500–06; Jiří Stromšík, 'Rezeption der europäischen Moderne in der tschechischen Avantgarde', in *Moderne in der deutschen und der tschechischen Literatur*, ed. by Klaus Schenk (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2000), pp. 29–68 (pp. 49–53); Zdeněk Pešat, 'Proletářská poezie', in *Dějiny české literatury*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský et al., 4 vols (Prague: Victoria, 1995), IV, 193–98; Markéta Brousek, *Der Poetismus: Die Lehrejahre der tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker* (Munich: Hanser, 1975), Chapter 2; and Květoslav Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavěk a vývoj marxistické estetiky* (Prague: Československá akademie věd, 1962), Chapter 2. Teige refers enthusiastically to his reading of an 'excellent article by Lunacharsky on the question of proletarian culture' in his diary entry on 22 August 1919; Teige, *Deníky*, p. 532. The editor's notes identify the article as 'Cultural Tasks of the Working Class'.

31 See Thomas Ort, *Art and Life in Modernist Prague: Karel Čapek and His Generation, 1911–38* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): on estrangement from Neumann, pp. 87–91 and 106–11; on relation to Masaryk, pp. 22–23 and 203–04. See also Kovtun, *Republika v nebezpečném světle*, pp. 463–76; and Karník, *České země v éře První republiky*, III, 285–86.

32 Hora's volume of verse *Pracující den* [The Working Day] (1920) and Seifert's verse collection *Město v slzách* [City in Tears] (1921) were prominent early products of Czech Proletarian Art, but Wolker's ballads, in particular from his collection *Těžká hodina* [Hour of Crisis] (1922), have become the most iconic examples of Czech proletarian poetry.

joined in 1922 and then left in early 1923, shortly before his untimely death from tuberculosis. Wolker had known and collaborated with Teige on literary projects since before the founding of Devětsil, though their relationship may have been strained by their differing ideals for Proletarian Art (Teige's avant-gardism was a bit too unbending for Wolker's taste) and perhaps also by a dose of old-fashioned competitiveness.³³ Initially Wolker, a native Moravian living in Prague, joined in the foundation of a competing group, based in the Moravian capital Brno, called Literární skupina [Literary Group], which gradually moved closer to an Expressionist aesthetic that Teige had come to abhor.³⁴ Yet developments were to bring Teige and Wolker closer: quite literally, as in March 1922 Wolker, having lost his previous accommodation, began renting a room in the Teige family flat. By the spring of 1922 Wolker felt that he and Literární skupina were moving in different directions, and he left it for Devětsil. Together with Teige and other members, Wolker drafted a programmatic article for the group which he read at a public recitation, and it was subsequently published under his name.³⁵ This short text, called simply 'Proletarian Art', remains a significant statement about this Czech movement's aims, emphasizing revolutionary character, collectivism, 'optimism', and tendentiousness as aesthetic principles (the last of these would soon undergo a remarkable metamorphosis at Teige's hands, discussed in Chapter Three).³⁶

The spring and summer of 1922 brought extraordinarily swift developments and realignments. The first was Teige's encounter with another young Moravian poet, Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958), recently arrived in Prague, who would soon become the towering poet of Devětsil and the Czech avant-garde. When Nezval first

33 This at least is the impression of one of Wolker's early close friends; see Zdeněk Kalista, *Kamarád Wolker* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1933), pp. 32–50. Kalista's account may be coloured by his own dissension with Teige.

34 The main theoretical spokesperson for *Literární skupina* was František Götz (1894–1974), with whom Teige engaged in various polemics regarding the value of a 'Czech Expressionism' in 1921–22. See, for example, František Götz, 'O Hosta a o ty, kteří stojí za ním' [On *Host* and Those Standing by It] (1922), and Karel Teige, 'O expresionismu' [On Expressionism] (1922), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 196–207. (Teige, it must be said, treated Götz with considerable condescension.) On Götz, *Literární skupina* and the intricacies of their relation to Devětsil, see Zuzana Říhová, *Vprostřed davu: Česká avantgarda mezi individualismem a kolektivismem* (Prague: Academia, 2016), esp. pp. 29–43; Zuzana Říhová, "'Nothing is Certain': Czech Post-War Literature between the Avant-Garde and Expressionism', in *Central Europe*, 14.2 (2016), 125–40; Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači*, pp. 145–61; Vladimír Papoušek, *Gravitace avantgard: Imaginace a řeč avantgard v českých literárních textech první poloviny dvacátého století* (Prague: Akropolis, 2007), pp. 32–65; and Jiří Brabec, 'Dvě krátké úvahy: Jedna o pohybu pojmu expresionismus, druhá o Götzově a Teigově sporu z počátku dvacátých let', in Brabec, *Pansvtí ideologie a moc literatury*, pp. 117–25. Literární skupina founded a journal, *Host* [The Guest], which achieved influence and financial solvency (no small feat) at a time when Devětsil had no such outlet, which led to Devětsil members, including Teige, publishing in the journal of their 'competitors', and for a time Teige and Seifert were on the editorial board of *Host*; see 'Prohlášení' [Declaration] (1924), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 589–90.

35 Jiří Wolker [and Teige], 'Proletářské umění' [Proletarian Art] (1922), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 220–24. On the group authorship of this text see Teige's account from shortly after Wolker's death, cited in *Výbor*, 1, 514–17. Wolker presented the statement publicly on 13 March 1922.

36 Teige later stated that 'optimism' was not a principle he had ever supported as it struck him as vague and 'too ideological'; see Karel Teige, 'Manifest Jiřího Wolkera o proletářském umění' [Jiří Wolker's Manifesto on Proletarian Art] (1927), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 11, 375–79 (p. 377).

arrived in Prague he had strong reservations about Devětsil and what he assumed was their dogmatic Marxism and dour concern for the plight of the workers. But after attending their recitation evening on 21 April 1922 he was converted, enthused by his perception of the group's focus on joy rather than suffering, and by the inspiration they found in the simple (not to say low-brow) sources of entertainment that made the lives of working-class people bearable, such as circuses, amusement parks, sporting events, and Chaplin films. He subsequently met with Teige in the latter's flat and recited to him a long, rhetorically intricate poem he had written before arriving in Prague, titled *Podivuhodný kouzelník* [The Marvellous Magician]. Teige apparently listened in silence and then, without commenting on the poem, went off to another appointment. But this was a turning point. Teige in fact proclaimed to his companions that Devětsil had found its first great modernist work, and Nezval quickly became a central figure within the group.³⁷

A second source of inspiration was Teige's trip to Paris, from 18 June to 12 July 1922. Teige made a whirlwind tour of studios of leading artists and architects — Ivan Goll, Man Ray, Constantin Brâncuși, Fernand Léger, Pierre Reverdy, and Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant among others — and his previously bookish Francophilia was confirmed by this first encounter with the French capital.³⁸ In addition to networking and collecting materials Teige also spent significant time studying ancient art and Old Masters in the Louvre and paid some attention to Japanese art and what he called 'Negro sculpture' as well. Particularly significant during this trip were his meetings with Man Ray (whose photographic work struck Teige as one of the purist expressions of avant-garde art), with Le Corbusier and Ozenfant (who cemented Teige's interest in architecture as one of the most important disciplines for modern creative activity), and with the Czech painter Josef Šíma (who would soon join Devětsil and act for them as a direct link between Prague and Parisian artistic circles). By the time Teige returned to Prague, architecture, cinema, and photography — in other words disciplines and media inseparable from the technology through which they were constructed — had assumed central importance for his thought.

As these new interests and inspirations gained momentum within Devětsil the group's relation to Neumann, whose understanding of Proletkult shifted ever more towards an uncompromising conception of agitational art, became strained. Teige and Seifert were expelled from the Proletkult group in early 1922, ostensibly for having collaborated with a 'centrist' journal, and though Devětsil and Proletkult continued to interact for some time thereafter, by 1923 the relationship of patronage with Neumann was effectively over.³⁹ But a different figure from an earlier

37 See Nezval's account in *Z mého života* [Scenes from my Life] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1959), pp. 88–91.

38 For further detail see Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 92–96; and Vratislav Effenberger, 'Nové umění', in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 575–619 (p. 588). See also Teige's diary entries from this trip: Teige, *Deníky*, pp. 596–604. During his second trip to Paris in August 1924 Teige not only reinforced his relationship with Le Corbusier but met the Perret brothers as well (see *Deníky*, p. 639, entries dated 27 and 28 August 1924).

39 See Effenberger, 'Nové umění', p. 586. Also see Jeanette Fabian, *Poetismus: Ästhetische Theorie und künstlerische Praxis der tschechischen Avantgarde* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 2013), p. 116; and Chvatík,

generation soon stepped in: the literary and art critic František Xaver Šalda (1867–1937). Šalda had been a major voice in Czech culture since the early 1890s and by the early 1920s was widely regarded as a towering authority. Šalda's critical output was enormous: his collected works run to twenty-three volumes, and during the 1930s he edited and in fact wrote — in the spirit of Karl Kraus and *Die Fackel* — the entire contents of an important cultural journal, *Šaldův Zápisník* [Šalda's Notebook].⁴⁰ Šalda's support for Devětsil was less commanding, more open, than Neumann's had been, and his moral encouragement and approval of their original initiatives was a huge boost for the young group. Šalda praised Nezval, for example, as 'the one who has most loyally fulfilled Teige's Poetist programme as an adventure of the senses and of thought — a liberating programme, since it has returned to poetry its lightness of wing, the excitement of joyful courage, the atmosphere of passion, indeed wantonness, without which it cannot live'.⁴¹ Teige, in turn, described Šalda in 1927 as the 'founder of Czech modernism' and the 'herald of a new era in our cultural life'.⁴² Šalda's support and encouragement must have been immensely gratifying for Teige, who had practically idolized Šalda since his teenage years.⁴³ Šalda influenced the mature Teige's thinking in particular through his emphasis on an integrative, synthesizing mode of thought that would bring rationalist and irrationalist impulses into communication, his critique of 'descriptive' naturalism in the literary and visual image, his Nietzschean conception of confident, 'style-generating' cultural epochs, and his conveyance of early, proto-Constructivist discourse from the *fin de siècle* (all of which we shall encounter in coming chapters). In many respects the shift in influence from Neumann to Šalda as 'senior mentor' paralleled the shift from Wolker to Nezval as the 'star poet' of Devětsil.

Bedřich Václavek, pp. 72–76.

40 Šalda's collected writings were published over many decades following the Second World War (with a cover designed by Teige): *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský, Václav Černý, Felix Vodička, Jiří Pistorius, et al., 23 vols (Prague: Melantrich, Československý spisovatel, Torst, and Institut pro studium literatury, 1948–2017). Two works stand out for their influence on Teige: Šalda's 1904 essay collection, *Boje o zítřek* [Struggles for Tomorrow], and his first major theoretical study, 'Synthetismus v novém umění' [Synthetism in the New Art] (1892). See, respectively, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, vol. I, and x, 11–54. *Šaldův Zápisník* was published in Prague by Otto Girgal, 1928–37.

41 F. X. Šalda, 'O nejmladší poesii české' (1928), in Šalda, *Studie z české literatury, Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, VIII, 129–200 (p. 169). In this substantial study Šalda reviews the poetry of Wolker, Hora, Seifert, Nezval, Konstantin Biebl, Vilém Závada, and František Halas. See also F. X. Šalda, 'Dva představitelé poetismu', in *ReD*, 1.3 (1927), 91–94 (originally published in 1925 in the journal *Nová Svoboda*). Šalda had defended these younger poets against their detractors as early as 1922: see 'Bilance a přípítek', 'F. X. Šalda znova lichotí mladé generaci', and 'O úpadku literatury: I mnohých věcí jiných...', in Šalda, *Kritické projevy, 12 (1922–1924)*, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, XXI, 13–18, 40–44, and 113–20.

42 Karel Teige, 'Vůdce české moderny' [Leaders of Czech Modernism] (1927), in *Výbor*, I, 243–49 (p. 248). (Teige identified the architect Jan Kotěra as the other great inspirational figure from that earlier generation.) See also Karel Teige, 'F. X. ŠALDA a devadesátá léta' [F. X. Šalda and the 90s] (1947), in *Výbor*, III, 291–320. See also the ringing paean to Šalda as founding figure of modern Czech culture, signed on behalf of Devětsil as a group, 'Básníku Bojů o zítřek: F. X. Šaldovi', in *ReD*, 1.3 (1927), 89–90. On Šalda's influence on the Devětsil generation, see Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači*, pp. 124–28 and (on the differences in their positions) pp. 132–33; also Effenberger, 'Nové umění', p. 582.

43 See, e.g., Teige's enthusiastic diary entries from 27 March to 5 April 1916 (Teige *Deníky*, pp. 194–98).



FIG. 1.2. *Devětsil Revolutionary Miscellany*, 1922. Private collection

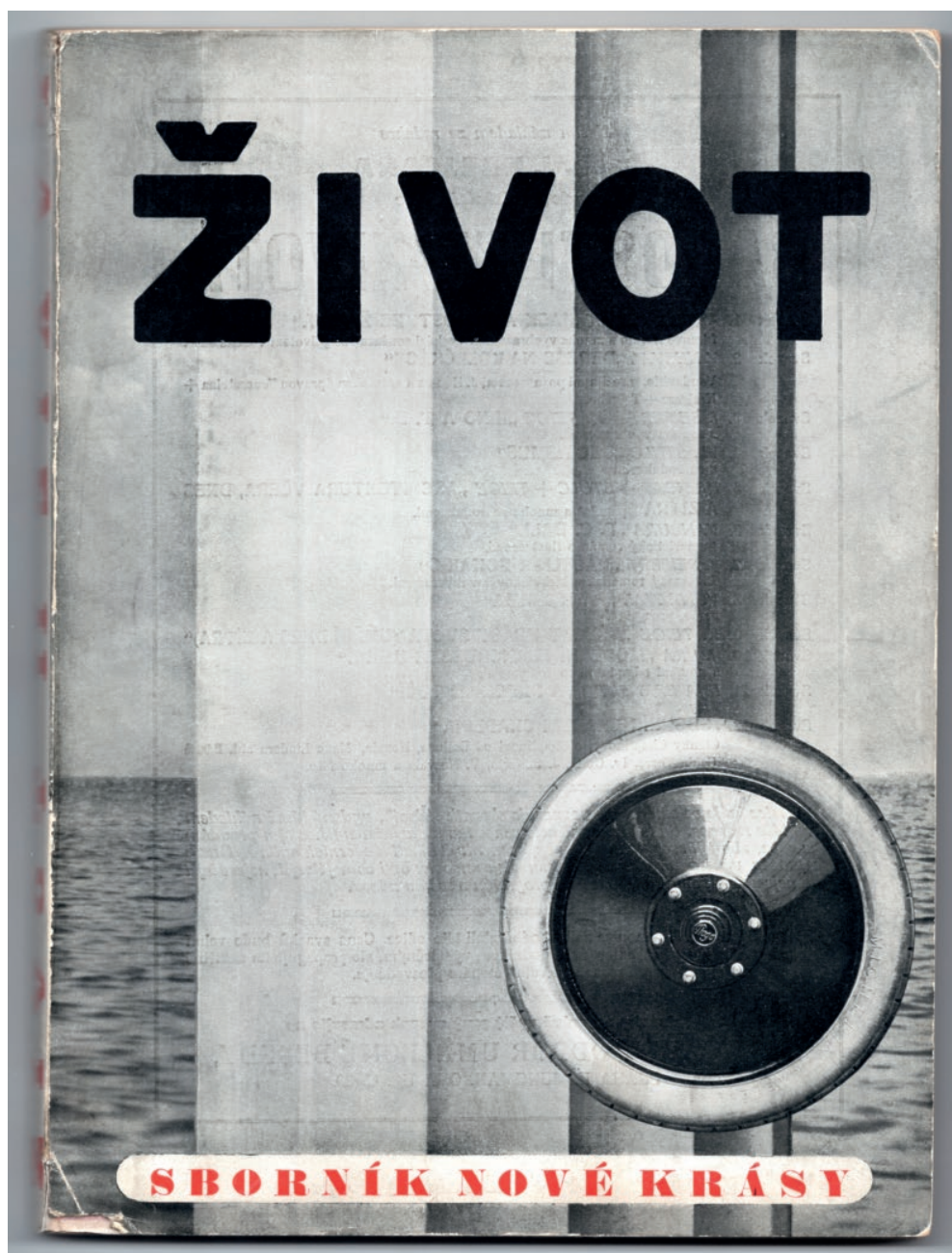


FIG. 1.3. *Life II*, 1922. Private collection

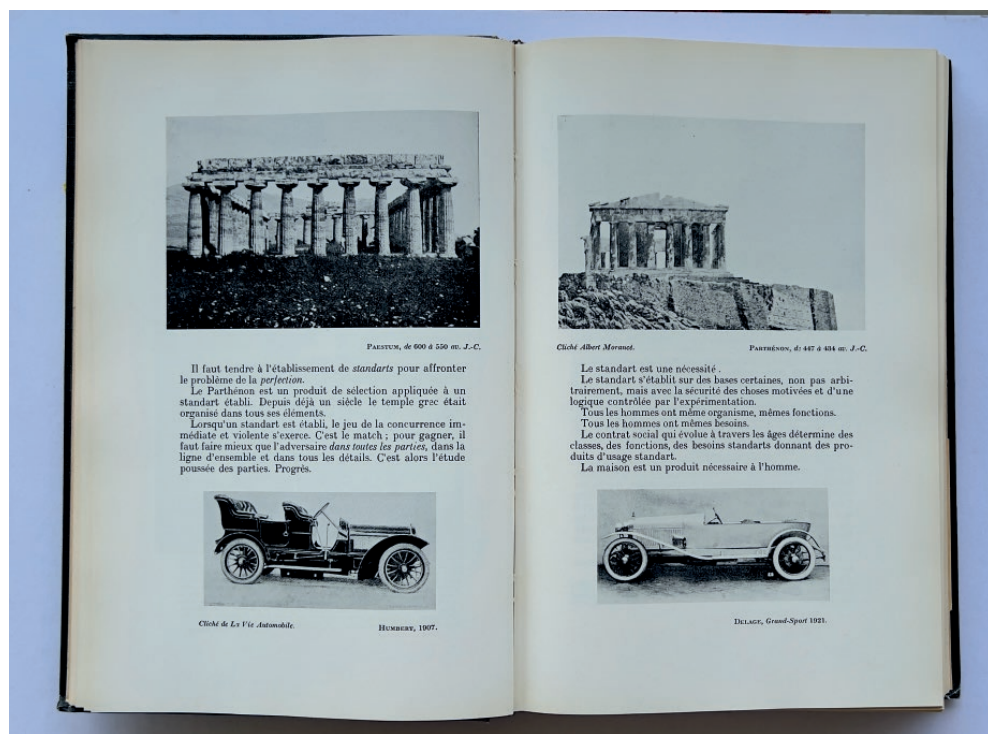


FIG. 1.4. Page spread from *L'Esprit nouveau*, 1921. Private collection

These developments bore fruit in the form of two group publications that have become classics of the Czech avant-garde (see Figs 1.2 and 1.3). Towards the end of 1922 Devětsil released *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* [Devětsil Revolutionary Miscellany], which contained not only Nezval's *Podivuhodný kouzelník* but also two major theoretical articles by Teige announcing a 'new proletarian art' that veered away from Neumann's conception and betrayed the gravitational attraction of Le Corbusier's Purism and Soviet Constructivism.⁴⁴ An even more radical break, however, came shortly afterwards, with the release of a second Devětsil collective volume *Život II* [Life II].⁴⁵ *Život II* was more experimental visually even than *Revoluční sborník*

44 Jaroslav Seifert, ed., *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (Prague: Verčernice V. Vortel, 1922). While Seifert was listed as editor, Teige had been the motivating force behind the conception of the volume. The important programmatic article 'Nové umění proletářské' [The New Proletarian Art] opens the volume, with Seifert listed as author, who also read it at several Devětsil recitation evenings (including the one on 12 April that had made a believer of Nezval), but Seifert and others later clarified that Teige was the actual author. Much like with the earlier programmatic article 'Proletářské umění', which appeared under Wolker's name even though Teige had had a major hand in drafting it, these loose attributions reflect Teige's belief that these articles represented group statements rather than individual opinions. Teige's other major programmatic article in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, 'Umění dnes a zítra' [Art Today and Tomorrow], appeared under his own name, imparting a (somewhat artificial) impression of programmatic consistency to this volume with multiple contributors.

45 See note 12. It is customary to include the numeral in the title because *Život* was an annual publication of the artist association Umělecká beseda [Artists' Forum], and only this number was

Devětsil (which focused more on literary than visual culture), utilizing a variety of non-standard layouts and superimposed typefaces, and was filled with illustrations juxtaposing ocean liners to Tibetan architecture, modernist sculpture to Native American totem poles, and Frank Lloyd Wright buildings to a snow-plough train, very much in line with the 'new spirit' proclaimed shortly before by Le Corbusier, to whose *L'Espirít nouveau* the juxtaposed automobile wheel and Doric column of the volume's cover explicitly alluded (see Fig. 1.4).⁴⁶ The volume was edited by one of the leading lights of ARDEV (the acronym for Devětsil's architecture wing), Jaromír Krejcar (the future husband of Milena Jesenská), though Teige played a major role as well. Teige later wrote that 'it was the *Život II* anthology, and it was Jaromír Krejcar, who, at least in our surroundings, first formulated in a courageous and binding manner the alphabet of the modern [*abeceda modernosti*]'.⁴⁷ In addition to copious illustrations of modern artworks and architecture, and poetry by Seifert, Nezval, and others, *Život II* contained theoretical essays on Purism by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant (one written specially for the volume), on cinema by Jean Epstein and Louis Delluc, on art and Constructivism by Ilja Ehrenburg, Peter Behrens, and Jaromír Krejcar, and on modern art and film by Teige. Josef Šima's article celebrating advertising (*reklama*) as a stimulus for avant-garde art was overwritten by large letters in flaming red ink — suggestive of metropolitan billboards or neon advertising attached to modern buildings — shouting out the vitalist phrase 'AŤ ŽIJE ŽIVOT!' [Long Live Life!], simultaneously an advertisement for the volume itself and a parting nod to Neumann's inspirational role for Devětsil (see Fig. 1.5).⁴⁸ The volume confidently included Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and even the long-dead Georges Seurat in the list of Devětsil's collaborators (one wonders if they were ever aware of the honour).⁴⁹ It is no exaggeration to say that with these two volumes, Teige and Devětsil completed their metamorphosis from a programme (Proletarian Art) marked by more than a trace of naïveté and aesthetic conservatism to a firmly progressive and original avant-garde programme.

That programme would soon thereafter get a name: Poetism. Often labelled Czech culture's most original contribution to the spectrum of European avant-garde movements, Poetism proclaimed and celebrated the ludic spontaneity of

edited by members of Devětsil. Jaromír Krejcar, one of the most innovative architects of the Czech avant-garde, had been entrusted with editing the volume, and he then brought in Teige and other Devětsil colleagues to create this flagship avant-garde publication.

46 As Jindřich Toman points out, the *Život II* cover is likely the first example of a Czech book cover using photomontage; it also takes Le Corbusier's comparison of Greek temple and modern automobile and condenses it through metonymy (wheel for car, column for temple) and montage (superimposition instead of juxtaposition). See Jindřich Toman, *Foto/montáž tiskem: Photo/Montage in Print* (Prague: Kant, 2011), p. 80.

47 Karel Teige, *Práce Jaromíra Krejčara* [The Work of Jaromír Krejcar] (Prague: Václav Petr, 1933), p. 6. On Krejcar, see also Rostislav Švácha, 'The Life and Work of the Architect Jaromír Krejcar', in *Jaromír Krejcar, 1895–1949* (Prague: Galerie Jaroslava Fragnera, 1995), pp. 42–45.

48 'Ať žije život!' was the title of one of Neumann's influential programmatic texts (see note 26).

49 A few years later Harold Lloyd did send, through his representative, thankful acknowledgement 'of the honor of his election to the literary Society described', which was proudly reproduced in the Devětsil journal *Pásmo*, 1.13–14 (1925), 1.

FIG. 1.5. Pages from *Život II*, 1922. Private collection

modern life, drawing inspiration from mass cultural forms such as film, jazz, and circuses, and even from activities such as tourism, athletics, and gastronomy.⁵⁰ As one important commentator has phrased it, Poetism developed a ‘felicitology’ that signaled a shift from the sociological concerns of Proletarian Art to an anthropological interest in how art makes people happy.⁵¹ Teige’s celebrated 1924 manifesto ‘Poetism’ describes its aims as

Nothing other than a lyrical-sculptural excitement at the wonder of the modern world. Nothing other than an amorous inclination toward life and its manifestations, the passion of modernity, modernolatry (worship of modernity), if we are to use the words of Umberto Boccioni. Nothing other than happiness, love, and poetry — heavenly things that cannot be purchased for money and that are not so serious that people are prepared to murder for them. Nothing other than joy, magic, and a manifold optimistic confidence in the beauty of life. Nothing other than the immediate data of sensibility. Nothing other than the art of wasting time. Nothing other than the melody of the heart. A culture of miraculous dazzling. Poetism wants to make life into a magnificent entertainment enterprise. An eccentric carnival, a harlequinade of feelings and images, a drunken reel of film, a miraculous kaleidoscope. Its muses are amiable, tender, and smiling, its perspectives are as fascinating and incomprehensible as the glances of lovers.⁵²

Teige’s programme for Poetism was thus not a programme at all. Rather than a set of specific assertions or practices it was primarily an attitude: curiosity and openness to the poetic experiences that life in the modern world enabled. Indeed, Teige’s manifesto ‘Poetism’ is organized around a sequence of claims of what Poetism *is not*: it is not literature, not painting, in fact not art at all. The Soviet author Ilya Ehrenburg’s phrase ‘the new art will cease to be art’ is one of Teige’s central slogans at this time. In his sequence of negative definitions Teige even states that Poetism is not an ‘ism’ — a claim that still divides commentators, who see either terse epigram or sheer contradiction. What Poetism is, Teige claims, is simply a *modus vivendi*.⁵³

50 For English-language accounts of Devětsil and Poetism, see Karel Srp, ‘Karel Teige in the Twenties: The Moment of Sweet Ejaculation’ and Lenka Bydžovská, ‘The Avant-Garde Ideal of Poësis: Poetism and Artificialism During the Late 1920s’, both in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L’Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 11–45 and 47–63, respectively; Esther Levinger, ‘Czech Avant-Garde Art: Poetry for the Five Senses’, *Art Bulletin*, 81.3 (1999), 513–32; Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 208–15; and František Šmejkal and Rostislav Švácha, eds, *Devětsil: Czech Avant-Garde Art, Architecture, and Design of the 1920s and 1930s* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art; London: Design Museum, 1990).

51 See Oleg Sus, ‘Totožnost člověka uprostřed víru: První studie o avantgardním antropologismu: Poetistický modus vivendi’, in Sus, *Estetické problémy pod napětím: Meziválečná avantgarda, surrealismus, levice* (Prague: Jůza and Jůzová, 1992), pp. 35–47 (p. 37). See also Oleg Sus, ‘Český poetismus 1924’, in *Divadlo*, 8 (1964), 28–35 (p. 28).

52 Karel Teige, ‘Poetism’, trans. by Ian Finlay, in *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourses*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023), pp. 151–56 (p. 153); ‘Poetismus’ (1924), in *Výbor*, 1, 121–28 (pp. 123–24). This text is commonly referred to as the ‘Poetist Manifesto’, while Teige’s later text titled ‘Manifest poetismu’ [The Manifesto of Poetism] (see note 75) is commonly referred to as ‘the second Poetist manifesto’.

53 See Teige, ‘Poetism’, pp. 151–53; ‘Poetismus’, pp. 124–26.

Nezval later described how he and Teige ‘discovered’ Poetism in the spring of 1923, using nostalgic, romanticized terms that capture something of the spirit of Poetism itself:

In the spring of 1923, that unforgettable year I shall remember to my dying day, on an evening of which every word is engrained in my memory, I was walking through Prague with Teige and, feeling an atmosphere of joy, witnessed by the fragrances of spring, the stars, the rosary beads of streetlights, vomiting drunkards, old beggar-women, and the make-up of prostitutes leaning up against street corners, we found a way out from the disharmony of those mummified, poisonous, and wearisome views of the world — and we discovered poetism.⁵⁴

Inevitably, that open Poetist attitude came to assume particular forms: in the mid-twenties it combined Nezval’s romanticized sense of urban grit with exoticism, the excitement of long-distance travel, popular entertainment such as circuses, and the discovery of the ‘primitive’. The exuberance of such rhetoric drew criticism at the time, and often still does, for being irresponsibly exoticist and escapist. The point is a tricky one, in part clearly valid yet in part ignoring how Poetism aimed to embrace the modern world in a straightforward manner, and to celebrate simple things that conventional understandings of culture deemed unworthy. Teige wrote: ‘Historicism, exoticism, and renewal of the Rousseauesque ideal: these anachronistic forms of Romanticism lead human thought astray from concrete tasks and everyday life’.⁵⁵ So for Teige it was traditional art forms that engaged in escapist exoticism. But he never explicitly contrasted ‘good’ and ‘bad’ exoticism. Poetist exoticism, however, was largely driven by the parallels between the ultra-exotic and the ultra-modern: Tibetan architecture was inspiring largely for its similarities to the American skyscraper, and the excitement of discovering far-off lands was inseparable from the excitement over the ocean liner or aeroplane that brought one there. The exoticism of the Devětsil poets contained more than a trace of sexist, racist and colonialist rhetoric (even though Czechoslovakia had no colonies), despite the self-fashioning as openness to the world and to cultures previously disdained by Europeans.⁵⁶ Poetist exoticism thus took part in ‘the discovery of things “nègre” by the European avant-garde[, which was] mediated by an imaginary America, a land of noble savages simultaneously standing for the past and future of humanity — a perfect affinity of primitive and modern’.⁵⁷

For Teige all of these developments and interconnections affected how people

54 Vítězslav Nezval, ‘Návěští o poetismu’ [Promulgation of Poetism] (1927), in *Čtení o Karlu Teigovi*, ed. by Jan Wiendl (Prague: Institut pro studium literatury, 2015), pp. 86–87 (p. 86).

55 Karel Teige, ‘Doba a umění’ [Art and the Age], in Teige, *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* [Building and Poem: Art Today and Tomorrow] (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), p. 31. The essay is dated ‘June 1923’. Teige continued: ‘[Traditional] art lived in the 14th or 15th century or on Tahiti; it refused to acknowledge its own calendar year and geographical location’, *loc. cit.*

56 See Meghan Forbes, *Technologies for the Revolution: The Czech Avant-Garde in Print* (forthcoming).

57 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 198. See also Veronika Veberová, ‘Exoticism, The Poetic Travelogue’, in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 199–208.

communicate and express themselves:

Today, an era of cosmopolitanism and advanced transportation networks, of international commerce, railways and the wireless, the era of aeroplanes and transatlantic liners, the era of spatial velocity [*prostorové rychlosti*], brings about the mutual interpenetration of languages. Railways, airplanes, and ocean liners create the grammar of an international language, the slang of the metropolis. Babelism. Polyglotism. All languages succumb to mutual infection: germanisms, gallicisms, anglicisms, russianisms. This makes them more supple. [...] It is only natural that in such circumstances literature becomes increasingly consciously cosmopolitan. In place of individual national literatures rises a world literature, as Marx foretold. The journals of the modern artistic avant-gardes are international and polyglot. An International of art is born.⁵⁸

So exoticism, technology, modernity, cosmopolitanism, and linguistic and cultural transformation were always linked themes in Teige's texts on Poetism. They expressed the development of closer ties between previously isolated cultures and peoples as well as the emergence of a global culture of modernism.

But Poetism did not exist on its own. Throughout the 1920s Teige propagated Poetism as only one pole of avant-garde culture, co-existing with the complementary, and indeed in many respects primary, principle of Constructivism. Teige's espousal of Constructivism in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* and *Život II* predated the 'discovery' of Poetism by several months. Constructivism was emerging at that time as a central position in the European avant-garde, especially in the Soviet Union and Germany, and Teige made no pretence of being original in his adoption of its tenets.⁵⁹ What was original about Teige's understanding of Constructivism, however, was the way he linked it in a dual programme with Poetism. One of his most important books, collecting articles and manifestos from the period 1919–26, expressed this linkage in its title: *Building and Poem*.⁶⁰ The intellectual sources of these two sides of Teige's dual programme were quite distinct. Constructivism emerged from French, Dutch, and Soviet sources and made use of the earlier architectural critique of ornament (Teige named Gustave Eiffel, the Chicago School, and especially Adolf Loos as major forebears).⁶¹ Poetist felicitology, by contrast, was embedded in a critique

58 Teige, 'Slova, slova, slova' [Words, Words, Words], in Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 92–122 (p. 96).

59 Useful discussions of international Constructivism include Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983). See also the sources assembled in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo, 1974). Historians of art have debated the relative influences of Le Corbusier's Purism vis-à-vis Soviet Constructivism in Teige's early formulations (see, e.g., Otakar Máčel, 'Karel Teige a ruská avantgarda', in *Avantgarda: vztah české a ruské avantgardy: K 80. narozeninám Jiřího Fraňka* (Prague: Národní knihovna České republiky and Slovanská knihovna, 2002), pp. 31–37) but this distinction is not decisive for the relation to Poetism.

60 See Karel Teige, *Stavba a báseň* (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927).

61 On this general tradition see Jean-Louis Cohen, *The Future of Architecture. Since 1889: A Worldwide History* (London: Phaidon, 2011), and Werner Oechslin, *Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, and the Road to Modern Architecture*, trans. by Lynette Widder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Older but classic accounts are Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*

of the traditional descriptive literary and visual image, a critique that Teige drew largely from Šalda and that he identified at times with mass cultural innovators such as Chaplin and later more frequently with literary modernists such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Apollinaire (thus traversing the high/low art divide so prominent in the thought of later theorists of modernism such as Clement Greenberg).

The link between Constructivism and Poetism often seems to remain on the level of metaphor in Teige's writings, and understanding the underlying logic of this dualism is one of the central challenges Teige poses.⁶² He wrote that while 'Constructivism is a method of work, Poetism is a life atmosphere'.⁶³ Teige often expressed their relation in spatial terms, writing for example that 'Poetism is the crown of life, whose basis is Constructivism', or that Poetism 'is founded on the ground plan of Constructivism'. Yet he understood the two credos to be not simply adjacent but deeply intertwined: 'It is in the interest of life for the calculations of engineers and thinkers to be rational. However, every calculation rationalizes irrationality only to a few decimal places. The calculation of every machine contains the symbol π '.⁶⁴ Teige envisioned the dualism of Constructivism and Poetism as the expression of a dialectical unity within a series of oppositions: rationality and irrationality, purposeful action and anti-instrumental pleasure or *Wohlgefallen*, scientific functionalism and pure lyricism, discipline and freedom, and everyday life and aesthetic elation. The dualism was thus intended to reconcile fundamental yet conflicting positions within avant-gardist discourse: radical productivism, opposed to any understanding of aesthetics as independent of material production, with a libRARY aesthetic celebrating the release of pure poetic form.

The dynamics of this dualist programme have both fascinated and frustrated commentators, and we shall return to the dualism frequently in this book. Here it suffices to note that the ambition and exuberance of the Constructivism–Poetism dualism made it easy for Teige's critics in the 1920s to charge him with naïve idealism, with a dogmatic desire to 'have it both ways', and with merely gathering exotica and chasing after artistic fashions. Teige was mocked as a pretentious Francophile for writing his name in the French form *Charles Teige* in publicity materials for Devětsil.⁶⁵ Josef Hora wrote a teasing poem in which he faux-

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960); and Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture*, 5th edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008 [1941]).

62 One of Teige's most important early commentators writes: 'This is not a dualism of activity and passivity, deed and dreaming, of the objective and the subjective, but rather a dialectic of active intellect and aggressive imagination'; Vratislav Effenberger, 'Karel Teige', in Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1969), pp. 187–222 (p. 192). See also the perspicacious discussion in Josef Vojvodík, 'Edifice and Poem', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 179–97. Other commentators regard the dualist schema as forced and 'artificial': see, e.g., Markéta Brousek, *Der Poetismus: Die Lehrjahre der tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975), p. 104.

63 Karel Teige, 'Estetika filmu a kinografie' [The Aesthetics of Film and Cinema] (1924), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 544–53 (p. 550).

64 Teige, 'Poetism', p. 152; 'Poetismus', p. 123. See also Karel Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 331–40 (p. 339). Czech original in *Výbor*, 1, 129–43 (p. 142).

65 Even some Devětsil colleagues poked fun at 'the great *Charles Tège*', pronouncing both Teige's

lamented, 'If I only had the imagination / To understand Teige's rotations / He directed me to Primitivism / And away from Civilism / And now he's for Civilism / And against Primitivism / My reasoning fails, but my heart sails / And that is what's so beautiful.'⁶⁶ In 1923 one of the major journalists of the First Republic period, the centrist-liberal Ferdinand Peroutka, mocked Devětsil and Teige more harshly:

These poets and theoreticians simply take anything that is new, exotic and enticing to their spirits, ranging from the lives of labourers to African idols, and toss them into the boiling pot of their almanacs in order to cook up from it all a new beauty. While doing so they presume that everything can go with anything. Mr Teige, recovering from his astonishment at the beauty of life in bars, goes on to extol the sculptural beauty of airplanes, automobiles, telephones and locomotives, and further wishes only that modern architecture will add to all that elements from Mexican, Aztec, Tibetan and African architecture.⁶⁷

Another opponent, Antonín Matěj Píša, a left-wing literary and theatre critic who had been a member of Devětsil during its proletarian art phase, accused Teige in 1927 of a 'remarkably primitive and arbitrary line of thought. In accordance with his simple formula of psychological contrasts he understands modern art, especially poetry, as the counterpart to the constructivist style'. Píša dismissed Teige as 'a collector of curiosities', merely striving for 'sensational effect'.⁶⁸ Less polemical forms of these charges echo in some scholarship even today.⁶⁹

Regardless, the mid-1920s became the glory days of Poetism and a highpoint of twentieth-century Czech culture. Nezval, Seifert, and Konstantin Biebl produced major works of poetry; Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (the pseudonym of Marie Čermínová) brought to Devětsil an extraordinary, quasi-Surrealist painting technique they named 'Artificialism'; Teige, Štyrský, Toyen and others developed a novel form of collage-like product they called the 'picture-poem' (*obrazová báseň*, see Figs I.4 and I.5); Jaroslav Rössler, Jaromír Funke, and others produced an extraordinary body of avant-garde photography (see Fig. 7.1); Devětsil theatre thrived in productions by Jindřich Honzl and the 'Liberated Theatre' of the comic duo Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich; architects of ARDEV such as Jaromír Krejcar, Ladislav Žák, Bedřich Feuerstein, Josef Havlíček, Karel Honzík and Vít Obrtel

name and surname in French fashion. See Honzík, *Ze života avantgardy*, p. 45. Also see Josef Knap, 'Prosím, vyberte si...k poetismu' [Please, help yourself... to poetism], in *Čtení o Karlu Teigovi*, pp. 52–55 (p. 52).

66 Josef Hora, 'Žák Devětsilu' [Pupil of Devětsil], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, I, 644.

67 Ferdinand Peroutka, 'O té avantgardě rrrévolutionnaire' [About that Rrrévolutionarry Avant-Garrde], in *Čtení o Karlu Teigovi*, pp. 28–33 (p. 32).

68 Antonín Matěj Píša, 'Boj o modernosti' [The Battle over Modernity], in *Čtení o Karlu Teigovi*, pp. 72–78 (pp. 76–77).

69 The charge of fashionable eclecticism is discernible in Thomas Ort's claim that under Teige's influence Devětsil elevated 'the utilitarian products of modern industrial civilization (crankshafts, gears, ball bearings — whatever really) to the status of art', and 'began in 1920 with an adamant rejection of "technical civilization" and the machine aesthetic celebrated by the cubists and the Futurists only to embrace these shortly thereafter as embodying the characteristic forms of modern life. It moved through a remarkable number of phases and isms, the most important of which were proletarian art, constructivism, and poetism. When it dissolved in 1931, it basically terminated in surrealism' (Ort, *Art and Life in Modernist Prague*, pp. 127 and 123).

produced striking modernist designs (see Fig. 4.2); and Devětsil-linked journals such as *Disk*, *Pásmo* (edited by the group's Brno branch), *Stavba* (an architectural journal that under Teige's editorship assumed international significance), and *ReD* ('Revue Devětsil', Teige's flagship journal from the later 1920s) have become classic documents of the period (see Figs 4.3 and I.8).⁷⁰

Furthermore, scholars of the Prague Linguistic Circle (established in 1926), in particular Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský, quickly became intrigued by the avant-garde activities of Devětsil.⁷¹ Jakobson had arrived in Prague in 1920 and became acquainted first with Seifert and Nezval, and then other members of Devětsil, informing them of the latest developments in Russian avant-garde poetry. Teige's 1924 'Poetism' manifesto offered some clear points of connection with Prague Circle interests, having declared that the new poetic language was 'the language of signs' and praising standardized semiotic systems such as traffic signs, semaphores, and maritime signal flags as aesthetic models.⁷² The curiosity was requited: in 1926 Teige wrote that it 'is clear that cooperation between modern Czech poets and the scientific research of Roman Jakobson [...] will greatly enrich

70 Further secondary literature will be referenced at appropriate places in this book, but the following provide some starting points in English and German. Poetry: *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bilek et al., *passim*; and Winner, *The Czech Avant-Garde Literary Movement*. Artificialism: Josef Vojvodík, 'Ultraviolet Pictures', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, pp. 409–21; and Karla Huebner, *Magnetic Woman: Toyen and the Surrealist Exotic* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021). Photography and picture poems: Matthew S. Witkovsky, ed., *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007); Vladimír Birgus, ed., *Czech Photographic Avant-Garde, 1918–1948* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); and Jaroslav Anděl and Anne Wilkes Tucker, eds, *Czech Modernism, 1900–1945* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Boston, MA Bullfinch Press, 1989). Theatre: Barbara Day, *Trial by Theatre: Reports on Czech Drama* (Prague: Karolinum, 2019), chapter 2; Andrea Jochmanová, 'Liberating the Theatre', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bilek et al., pp. 251–62; and Veronika Ambros, 'Prague: Magnetic Fields or the Staging of the Avant-Garde', in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, 4 vols (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004), II, 176–82. Architecture: Rostislav Švacha, *The Architecture of New Prague, 1895–45*, trans. by Alexandra Büchler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), Chapters 3 and 4. Journals: Jindřich Toman, 'Languages of Reading, Languages of Seeing: Notes on Linguistic and Visual Internationalism in Czech Avant-Garde Magazines', and Irina Wutsdorff, 'Zur demonstrativen Internationalität der Zeitschrift Red', both in *Zeitschriften als Knotenpunkt der Moderne/n: Prag — Brünn — Wien*, ed. by Marek Nekula (Heidelberg: Winter, 2019), pp. 145–59 and pp. 161–75 respectively; and Nicholas Sawicki, 'The View from Prague', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooks, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop, vol. III: *Europe, 1880–1940, Part I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1074–98. Also see note 50.

71 The literature on the Prague Linguistic Circle is large, but see Lubomír Doležel, 'Structuralism of the Prague School', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. VIII: *From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. by Raman Selden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 33–57; Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); J. G. Merquior, *From Prague to Paris: A Critique of Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Thought* (London: Verso, 1986); F. W. Galan, *Historic Structures: The Prague School Project, 1928–1946* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); and Peter Steiner, 'Jan Mukařovský's Structural Aesthetics', in Jan Mukařovský, *Structure, Sign, and Function*, trans. and ed. by Peter Steiner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. ix–xxxiv.

72 See Teige, 'Poetism', p. 152; 'Poetismus', p. 125.

Czech poetic language'.⁷³ Ultimately the endeavours of Devětil's avant-garde artists, writers, and architects, and scholarly research by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, found common purpose and 'the magic of a common language', and were also grounded, often enough, in personal friendships (see Fig. 5.2).⁷⁴

Teige's reference points for Poetism underwent a gradual shift over the mid- to late twenties from mass culture to high modernism, and from critiquing to embracing aesthetic autonomy. This shift, deeply connected with Teige's developing notion of an 'aesthetic function' (influenced by Jakobson and Mukařovský and examined in Chapter Five), must make one wary of speaking of Poetism as an unchanging idea. The shift was not just on the level of theory, however: it was shadowed by the increasing sense that Devětil was becoming spoiled by success, and that Poetism was devolving from creative credo to prescriptive programme and imitative gesture.

Teige's 'second Poetist manifesto', published in *ReD* in 1928, addressed both this theoretical and social shift.⁷⁵ Teige opens with a return to that paradoxical statement from the first 'Poetism' manifesto, the claim that 'Poetism is not an ism', and he grants that despite all best efforts Poetism *has* in fact devolved into an ism: 'from metaphorical characteristics themes have arisen, and new subject matter for truly Parnassian verse. This is how Poetism became, against our original intentions, an artistic movement, a recent ism, the latest chapter of literary history and a poetic school, or even, in the lowest circles, a formula'.⁷⁶ Teige's metaphors of clowns, acrobats, sailors, and tourists, of an art that was 'as accessible as sport, love, wine, and all the delicacies', had been transformed into and cheapened as standardized motifs. In an attempt to recapture the sense of Poetism as a mode of experience rather than artistic doctrine or ism, Teige shifted from the earlier felicitology (now tainted by too many works of dubious quality about clowns and sailors) to a definition of poetry (*poesie*) that was informed by not only anthropological but also psychoanalytic concepts. The *poesie* that Teige intended here, for which I shall retain his Czech term throughout this book, was not simply poetry in the literary

73 Teige, 'Slova, slova, slova', p. 110.

74 See for example Nezval's effusive dedication to Jan Mukařovský in *Pět prstů* (Brno: Kilian, 1932), pp. 3–5. On the broader interconnections between Devětil 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. by Iris Urwin, *American Journal of Semiotics*, 2 (1983), 13–21; Jiří Veltruský, 'Jan Mukařovský's Structural Poetics and Esthetics', in *Poetics Today*, 2.1b (Winter 1980–81), 117–57 (p. 129); and Květoslav Chvatík, *Strukturalismus a avantgarda* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970).

75 'Manifest poetismu', in Teige, *Výbor*, 1, 323–59. The actual title is simply 'Manifesto of Poetism', but it is referred to as the *second* Manifesto of Poetism to distinguish it from the 1924 manifesto titled 'Poetismus' (see note 52). Teige's unwavering antipathy to formalized artistic 'programmes' or 'schools' was inspired by F. X. Šalda, who in the 1890s had insisted that his own credo of 'synthetism' 'is not a closed dogma, not a literary programme, not the manifesto of a school or movement'; F. X. Šalda, 'Synthetism v novém umění', p. 53.

76 Teige, 'Manifest poetismus', p. 326. Compare Moisei Ginzburg's comparable lament a year earlier in relation to Soviet Constructivism being distorted into 'an individual "constructive-aesthetic style"' and 'stereotype'. Moisei Ginzburg, 'Results and Prospects' (1927), trans. by Hannah Connell, *The Journal of Architecture*, 22.3 (2017), 595–602 (pp. 595 and 598).

sense (for that narrower notion Teige reserved the Czech term *básnictví*) but rather a fundamental creative drive, largely erotic in nature, that engaged the entire human sensorium, a ‘poetry for the five senses’.⁷⁷ In describing this *poesie* Teige pulled out all the rhetorical stops:

In the era of the decline and extinction of old forms of art, painting, literature, and the like, *POESIE* is born, *poesie* in the sense that the Greeks understood but did not have, *poiesis*, an integral, sovereign, life-giving creative act. [...] This *poesie*, assembling novel aesthetic qualities, fabricated with new methods and from new materials, seeks a new consumer, a new spectator and auditor, a new human being [*nový člověk*], so that it can quench the raging thirst for lyricism and richly reward all the senses and sensibility through vital new energies and intensities.⁷⁸

Such *poesie* necessarily crossed, and thereby worked to eradicate, the boundaries between various media such as painting, literature, architecture, and so on, revealing a holistic human need for ‘lyricism’ grounded in unconscious drives and unruly desires.⁷⁹

The social shifts within Devětsil, however, proved too deep to be resolved through theorizing. Questions about the ongoing vitality of Poetism only grew, and the situation within Devětsil reached a crisis point at the end of the twenties. The pivotal period in this respect was 1929–30, during the course of what has come to be called the Generational Discussion. This was an ornery polemical exchange among members of the ‘Devětsil generation’ in late 1929 begun by the painter Štyrský, who accused various figures in or close to Devětsil of having sold out to cultural authorities, either by accepting official state prizes for their work (Vančura and Hora) or by descending into kitsch productions for the mass market or for the vibrant Czech film industry (Nezval). Štyrský’s polemic was not only a version of the ‘success seduces’ charge familiar when left-wing artists achieve material success but also, as Josef Vojvodík has pointed out, anticipates discussions about

77 Teige reprinted ‘Manifest poetismu’, combined with another major essay ‘Báseň, svět, člověk’ [Poem, World, Human Being], in his book *Svět, který voní* under the chapter title ‘Poesie pro pět smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu’ [*Poesie for the Five Senses, or the Second Manifesto of Poetism*]. See Chapter Five for further details.

78 Teige, ‘Poesie pro pět smyslů’, in *Svět, který voní*, p. 227 (bold in original). Teige’s early statements also worked with a grandiose notion of *poesie*, such as, for example, the 1923 article ‘Malířství a poezie’ [Painting and Poetry]: ‘We stand before a logical consequence: the fusion of painting with modern poetry. *There is only a single art, and it is poetry* [*poezie*]’; in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, pp. 494–94 (p. 495, Teige’s emphasis). This article contains Teige’s first use of the term ‘Poetism’ in print, and explicitly connects this fusion of painting and poetry with the new genre of the picture-poem (*obrazová báseň*), discussed in more detail in the Intermezzo below. Such earlier examples, however, are not framed in the language of drives and senses so significant in later writings, where Teige also favours the spelling *poesie* over *poezie*, possibly for its more evident connection to Ancient Greek *poiēsis*. (In *Výbor* and *Avantgarda známá a neznámá* Teige’s spelling has been unified as *poezie*.)

79 For Teige’s association of *poesie* and the creative drive with a Freudian conception of libido, see *ibid.*, pp. 169 and especially pp. 228–31. For further context see Jindřich Toman, ‘POETRY, Capitalized Throughout’, in *El Arte de la Vanguardia en Checoslovaquia, 1918–1938 / The Art of the Avant-Garde in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1938*, ed. by Jaroslav Anděl (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993), pp. 207–11.

the institutionalization of avant-garde art in the United States and Western Europe in the post-war period.⁸⁰ In practical terms these bitter polemics initiated the breakdown of Devětsil and, shortly thereafter, its replacement by a new grouping Teige was instrumental in founding, 'Levá fronta' [Left Front], which provided a wide-tent space for left-wing cultural activities during the 1930s.⁸¹

The Generational Discussion, however, had been prefigured in the spring of 1929 by a political row among left-wing Czechoslovak artists and writers. In February, the Fifth Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) had elected a new leadership trained and approved by the Comintern, bringing the party into the orthodox Bolshevik line.⁸² (The newly elected chairman, Klement Gottwald, would go on to lead the 'Victorious February' takeover two decades later and in the 1950s became the locus of a personality cult modelled on Stalin's own. Gottwald's loyalty to Stalin was captured by the acerbic joke pointing out that he obediently followed Stalin even into the grave, as he died on 14 March 1953, just nine days after his idol.) For Czech artists and writers who sympathized or identified with the KSC this change forced a reckoning, and on 27 March 1929 seven prominent authors, including two members of Devětsil (Seifert and Vančura), published a leaflet denouncing the 'incompetent grandiosity of the comrades in the leadership' of the KSC and warning that, by embracing sectarianism and 'fractionalist terror', the party was destroying its ability to serve as a mass political force.⁸³ The leaflet called for the summoning of an extraordinary party congress to reverse the results of the recent leadership election.⁸⁴ These were strong words, and the response was swift: not only did the official party leadership accuse 'the Seven' (as they were soon labelled) of being 'petit bourgeois' and expel them from the KSC, but a group of other writers and critics — Teige prominently among them — signed a counter-declaration condemning the 'grave error' of the Seven and publicly parting ways with them.⁸⁵ The ironies are bitter: Teige gave his support to a politician, Gottwald,

80 See Vojvodík, 'The Czech Avant-Garde', p. 28. For the main documents of the Generational Discussion, see Vlašín, ed., *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, vol. III. Useful overviews of the development of the polemic can be found in Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 335–42; Vladimír Dostál, 'Diskuse ne pouze generační', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, III, 7–44; and the commentary in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 566–70.

81 On the founding of Levá fronta see Karel Teige, '1929' and 'Levá fronta' in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, III, 107–18 and 119–21.

82 See Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky*, I, 553–56 and II, 150–64.

83 They had a point. In the 1925 elections, the first in which the KSC had participated, it had achieved spectacular results: the greatest share of votes in Bohemia, and the second-highest share in the country as a whole, ahead of even the Social Democrats (who had had the strongest result in the country's first elections in 1920). In both the 1930 and 1935 elections the KSC lost a degree of support and fell behind the Social Democrats. See Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky*, I, 377 and 558, and II, 496.

84 'Spisovatelé komunistické komunistickým dělníkům' [Communist Writers to Communist Workers], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, III, 47–48 (p. 48). The seven signatories were Josef Hora, Marie Majerová, Helena Malířová, S. K. Neumann, Ivan Olbracht, Jaroslav Seifert, and Vladislav Vančura.

85 'Zásadní stanovisko k projevy "Sedmi"' [Principled Standpoint to the Declaration of 'the Seven'] (1929), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, III, 54–55 (p. 54). Signatories to this declaration



FIG. 1.6. Good times and bad: Adolf Hoffmeister's caricatures of the founding meeting of Devětsil in 1920 and of the Generational Discussion in 1929 (in both Teige in the centre with the pipe). Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collection; by kind permission of the heirs of Adolf Hoffmeister

who twenty years later led the party as it hounded Teige to death; while Neumann, who would be celebrated by the Stalinist cultural apparatchiks of the 1950s, had initially publicly rejected their future leader.⁸⁶

Beyond all the accusations and name-calling, Teige came to see the heart of the Generational Discussion in a 'crisis of criteria' characterizing avant-garde Marxist practice and theory. But he associated this crisis primarily with artistic theory (Poetism) in contrast to the unshaken conceptual clarity of avant-garde architectural theory (Constructivism): 'In disciplines more closely tied to economic and industrial life, such as architecture, it has been possible to gain more from the Marxist literature; the theory of architecture is thus more advanced than the theory of poetry [*básnictví*] or theatre and has more precise criteria'.⁸⁷ So the collapse of Devěšil initiated the breakdown of the Constructivism–Poetism dualism as well. During the first years of the Levá fronta period, in fact, Teige focused his attention almost exclusively on architectural theory. Much of his writing in this period concentrated on the sociology of architecture (Teige delivered a lecture series at the Bauhaus in 1930 on the topic) and on how architecture could effect fundamental social change along Marxist lines. Teige wrote a few years later that an 'architecture that has accepted dialectical materialism as its method thus evolves into a critique of life, the era, and society and becomes an instrument for their change and restructuring'.⁸⁸ The direct, practical implications of architecture, its firmer grounding in the 'base' (in the Marxian sense), thus provided Teige with a greater sense of relevance and engagement at a time when the political and economic atmosphere in Europe and indeed globally was becoming increasingly ominous. '[M]odern architecture also implies class struggle', he wrote, adding that it 'signals a shift from illusion to the thing itself, to reality — a shift from abstraction to the concrete, from academic speculation to practical socioeconomic work'.⁸⁹ When Teige did finally return in 1934 to the theory of visual art and literature, under the programme of Surrealism, the unified theory of the avant-garde that had been so characteristic of and problematic for his work in the twenties was transformed from explicit argument to implicit assumption.⁹⁰

were Teige, Nezval, Konstantin Biebl, Vilém Závada, František Halas, Karel Konrad, Ladislav Novomeský, Vladimír Clementis, Bedřich Václavek, Jiří Weil, Julius Fučík, and Vojtěch Tittelbach. Závada quickly clarified that although he had been part of the discussions he had disagreed with the final statement and his signature had been included in error.

86 For Clementis the irony was beyond bitter: he was among those condemned in the Rudolf Slánský show trial in 1952 and was hanged on 3 December 1952. The image of Clementis being airbrushed out of an official photograph of Gottwald features in the opening pages of Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

87 Karel Teige, 'Bouře na levé frontě' [Tempest on the Left Front] (1930), in *Výbor*, 1, 474–75. Earlier in the article Teige writes: 'it is impossible not to acknowledge that in its current state the work of criticism, which on all sides figures as a "crisis of criticism", is to a large extent caused by a crisis of criteria'; *ibid.*, pp. 473–74.

88 Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, trans. by Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 6, translation modified. Czech original: Karel Teige, *Nejmenší byt* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1932), p. 19.

89 Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, p. 12; *Nejmenší byt*, p. 24.

90 In his important discussion of Teige's understanding of the relation between functionalist

Levá fronta: The Discipline of the Avant-Garde

Teige's international activities and architectural studies in the early thirties (together with his editorship of *Stavba* in the 1920s) have earned him a prominent place in the history of interwar modernist architecture. Teige became the central figure in the establishment of a Czechoslovak delegation to the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), founded in Switzerland in 1928 largely in response to the snubbing of modernist submissions during the 1927 competition for the League of Nations Headquarters in Geneva. CIAM encompassed many of the most eminent names in modernist architecture, such as Sigfried Giedion, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius, and plausibly presented itself as the organizational centre for international architectural modernism, so Teige's position as head of the Czechoslovak delegation was striking evidence of his international reputation at this point.⁹¹ Indeed Teige's status was such that at the end of the decade he could engage Le Corbusier himself in a critical polemic about the latter's project for a 'Mundaneum', a debate that has come to be seen as a key moment in the development of the modernist movement (see Chapter Four). Even during that awkward quarrel Le Corbusier wrote to Teige: 'If since 1921, the Czechs have shone so brightly in the emerging sky of the new times, it is largely because of you people, your magazines, your manifestos, your poems, people such as Teige, Nezval, Krejcar, etc.'⁹² Among Soviet Constructivists Teige's influence is indicated by the primacy Moisei Ginzburg attributed to *Stavba*, the journal Teige had edited since 1923, in establishing links between western and Soviet modernist thought: '[W]ith the help of a series of journals and books, and, primarily, with the help of the Czechoslovakian journal *Stavba*, the French *Espirit Nouveau*, the Dutch *De Stijl* and the Polish *Blok*, Soviet architects are realizing that behind the customs barrier in almost every European country there is a group, however large or small, of revolutionary innovators, the

architecture and surrealism, Rostislav Švácha writes: 'much points to the fact that the "strange partnership" of functionalism and surrealism — as Jaroslav Anděl has described the relation — did not appear to Teige himself as any sort of separation, though one must also admit that he never described the relation between functionalism and surrealism in the sort of clear and evident way that he formulated the relation between constructivism and poetism in the twenties'; see Rostislav Švácha, 'Surrealismus a architektura', in *Český Surrealismus, 1929–1953*, ed. by Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp (Prague: Argo and Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1996), pp. 268–79 (p. 272). Cf. Jaroslav Anděl, 'The 1930s: The Strange Bedfellows, Functionalism and Surrealism', in *The Art of the Avant-Garde in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 292–385. Also see Rostislav Švácha, 'Karel Teige and the Devětsil Architects', in *Rassegna*, 53 (1993), 6–21 (p. 14), and Hana Císarová, 'Surrealism and Functionalism: Teige's Dual Way' in the same issue of *Rassegna*, 79–87.

91 CIAM's early, tentative list of figures to approach to lead the Czechoslovak delegation named, of all people, Adolf Loos and Josef Gočar. But Cornelius van Eesteren objected: 'Gochar Prague??? Why don't you ask Teige who should be considered. Surely, there must be some better qualified people'. The CIAM organizers quickly concluded that Teige himself was best qualified. Letter from Giedion to Gropius, quoted in Klaus Spechtenhauser and Daniel Weiss, 'Karel Teige and the CIAM: The History of a Troubled Relationship', in *Karel Teige: L'Enfant Terrible*, ed. by Dluhosch and Švácha, pp. 216–55 (p. 246, note 10).

92 Le Corbusier, 'In Defense of Architecture', trans. by Nancy Bray, André Lessard, Alan Levitt, and George Baird, *Oppositions*, 4 (1974), 93–106 (p. 94). Originally published in Czech as 'Obrana architektury' in *Musaion*, 2 (1931), 27–52.

paths of whom, in several respects, intersect with our own'.⁹³ Furthermore, Teige's interaction with the Bauhaus, which extended back to the early 1920s, took on greater intensity during Hannes Meyer's tenure as director from 1928 to 1930, since Meyer and Teige shared both a rigorous understanding of functionalism and a firm commitment to the idea that modernist architecture not only required, but must in fact constitute, a form of political engagement. Meyer invited Teige to a term as visiting *Dozent* at the Bauhaus in 1929–30. When the Mayor of Dessau fired Meyer as director shortly thereafter because of his communist convictions, Teige launched a thunderous campaign in *Stavba* and *ReD* in Meyer's defence and maintained active contacts with him for many years thereafter. (CIAM, by contrast, remained eerily silent on Meyer's dismissal.)⁹⁴ The lectures Teige gave at the Bauhaus became the core of a book on the sociology of architecture, and he also wrote several detailed monographs on the historical development and contemporary situation of European architectural modernism both in Czechoslovakia and internationally.⁹⁵

Teige's most significant work in this period, however, is his 1932 book *Nejmenší byt* [The Minimum Dwelling]. In more than 350 densely printed pages the book covers topics ranging from anthropological and philosophical questions about the nature of dwelling to discussion of design details such as the proper location of cloakrooms or the best lighting arrangements for bathrooms. The book is arguably Teige's greatest achievement in terms of uniting idealistic, visionary conjecture with rationalist, pragmatic detail, and it ranks unquestionably among the most important documents of interwar architectural modernism. The 'dwelling for the subsistence-minimum' had been the central theme at the 1929 CIAM conference in Frankfurt am Main, and while Teige did not attend that conference he studied its outcomes closely. When he acted as lead organizer of the Czechoslovak delegation that contributed with considerable success to the following CIAM conference in

93 Ginzburg, 'Results and Prospects', p. 597.

94 See Michalová, pp. 347–50; Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 17–19; and Spechtenhauser and Weiss, 'Karel Teige and the CIAM', pp. 235–39.

95 Teige's major architectural studies in this period include three volumes published with the Prague publisher Odeon in the series MSA ('Mezinárodní soudobá architektura' [International Contemporary Architecture]): *Mezinárodní soudobá architektura* (1929); *Moderní architektura v Československu* (1930), in English: Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2000); and *Havlíček a Honzík: Stavby a plány* (a study of buildings and plans by the Devětsil architects Josef Havlíček and Karel Honzík, 1931); two volumes with the Prague publishing house Václav Petr in the series ESMA ('Edice soudobé mezinárodní architektury' [Contemporary International Architecture Series]): *Nejmenší byt* and *Práce Jaromíra Krejčara* (1932 and 1933, see notes 88 and 47 respectively); *K sociologii architektury* (Prague: Odeon, 1930); 'Architektura a třídní boj' [Architecture and Class Struggle] (1931), in *Výbor*, II, 26–49; a series of studies published in Prague by the 'Knihovna Levé fronty' [Left-Front Library]: *Zahradní města nezaměstnaných* [Garden Cities of the Unemployed] (1933); *Architektura levá a pravá* [Left-Wing and Right-Wing Architecture] (1934); and *Za socialistickou architekturu* [Towards a Socialist Architecture] (edited volume, 1933); and *Sovětská architektura* [Soviet Architecture] (Prague: Pavel Prokop, 1936). On this period of Teige's activity, see Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 347–69; Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*; Rostislav Švácha, 'Before and After the Mundaneum: Teige as Theoretician of the Architectural Avant-Garde', in *Karel Teige: L'Enfant Terrible*, ed. by Dluhosch and Švácha, pp. 106–39; Spechtenhauser and Weiss, 'Karel Teige and the CIAM'; Otakar Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda* (Prague: Prostor, 1998), pp. 258–64; Effenberg, 'Karel Teige', pp. 195–205; and the commentary in *Výbor*, I, 556–60 and II, 549–69.

Brussels, in 1930, he helped expand the question of the ‘dwelling for the subsistence-minimum’ to include questions of the underlying economic causes of what Teige called ‘housing misery’.⁹⁶ The articles he wrote at the time of these conferences were expanded in *The Minimum Dwelling*, which right at the outset indirectly indicated what Teige felt were the main deficiencies of how the CIAM conferences had approached these questions:

The housing question would be viewed one-sidedly, wrongly, and distortedly if one failed to deal with it according to its relationship to the economic system and the structure of society, on the one hand, and with respect to the given state of the family and the domestic household, the ruling ideology, prevailing morality, customs, and the legal order, on the other hand. Dealing with the question of the dwelling for the subsistence minimum [...] is possible only synthetically, in all its aspects and within the context of all its economic, hygienic, ideological, and sociopolitical ramifications.⁹⁷

Only such a synthetic analysis could reveal the true scale of the problem. But it also revealed that one could not seek merely ‘an emergency solution’ to alleviate the worst pressures of the housing crisis and thus temporarily dodge major political upheaval.⁹⁸ To seek in architecture a desperate remedy to avoid fundamental social and political restructuring — as expressed in Le Corbusier’s famous epigram: ‘Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided’ — is misguided, and Teige clearly felt many of the CIAM participants fell into this error.⁹⁹

From his very terminology one senses the escalation in what Teige felt was involved here. The CIAM conference and its related publications spoke of housing for the ‘subsistence minimum’ (*Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*), easily understood as basic, serviceable accommodation for the least privileged classes. In his early articles Teige used the phrase ‘minimal dwelling’ (*minimální byt*), shifting emphasis onto the new form of housing and away from the debilitating notion of a subsistence minimum. But in his book he wrote of *nejmenší byt*, the ‘smallest dwelling’, replacing the notion of serviceability or lack with a neutral designation of size. One of the central arguments of Teige’s book was that the minimum dwelling as he understood it was not a third- or fourth-rate compromise from, a ‘minimal’ version of, the dwelling working-class people really wanted, but a precise, functionally honed answer to the needs they currently had. (As mentioned in the Introduction, Teige applied these criteria to his own living conditions.) The logic of housing under capitalism meant that any understanding of ‘subsistence minimum’ housing as a scaled-down, frugal version of housing for the more affluent would ultimately condemn the proletariat to mere accommodation or lodging (*nocleh*) that

96 Spechtenhauser and Weiss wrote: ‘Questions of economic and social causes of the housing problem, which had been largely excluded from the Frankfurt Congress, were now [in Brussels] to be extensively discussed, directly as a result of Teige’s contribution’; ‘Karel Teige and the CIAM’, p. 227.

97 Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, p. 3; *Nejmenší byt*, p. 17.

98 Karel Teige, ‘The Minimum Dwelling and the Collective House’, trans. by Alexandra Büchler, in *Karel Teige: L’Enfant Terrible*, ed. by Dluhosch and Švácha, pp. 195–215 (p. 206). Czech original ‘Minimální byt a kolektivní dům’, *Stavba*, 9 (1930–31), 28–29, 47–50, 65–68 (p. 48).

99 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (1923), trans. by Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), p. 289.

might answer bare biological necessities but offered no scope for ‘dwelling’ (*bydlení*) in the fuller sense, understood as a productive composite of variegated activities.¹⁰⁰ Thus Teige posited that the minimum dwelling required a fundamentally new form of housing: the collective house (*koldom*). This qualitative change had consequences extending far beyond questions of architectural design: ‘The architectural avant-garde resolves the problem of the minimum dwelling through the form of the collective house. Collective dwellings are structures and design solutions of a higher quality than the existing family-centred form of household, and they are in stark conflict with the existing perception of the family as the primary social unit and the mainstay of the dominant family ideology’.¹⁰¹ The basic feature of the collective house was the provision for each adult, regardless of gender, with a room of their own. Activities such as child-rearing and food preparation would be undertaken communally, allowing the living ‘units’ (*buňky*, literally ‘cells’ in the biological sense) to consist of the minimum space required for rest, privacy, and personal dignity. Presupposed in this arrangement is a fundamental dissolution of the patriarchal bourgeois family. Women would be freed from domestic and child-rearing chores, which would be managed communally. Teige stated:

If women are to become completely equal with men, they cannot be expected to work simultaneously at two jobs: one in production and the other at home. In order to fully integrate her into the production process as an equal partner with men, she must be completely liberated from the serfdom of domestic work [*od roboty*]: she must be liberated not only from the chores of housecleaning, kitchen work, sewing and mending clothes, and washing the laundry but also from the job of rearing her children.¹⁰²

Here the imbrication of architectural design with fundamental social restructuring is clear. The rhetoric of gender equality is notable (although one wonders who would have been most likely to man the communal kitchens and nurseries and strongly suspects it would not have been men). Teige drew on a range of influences: on arguments and practices that had been put forward in early Soviet experiments in urban communes and by thinkers such as Alexandra Kollontai, as well as on conceptions of the *koldom* and the ‘social condenser’ developed by Soviet Constructivists such as Ginzburg and other members of the OSA (Organization of Contemporary Architects); but he also drew heavily on venerable sources such as Friedrich Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and on Charles Fourier’s conception of the phalanstery.¹⁰³ Teige embedded his arguments for and descriptions of the minimum dwelling within an extensive

100 See Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, p. 17; *Nejmenší byt*, p. 28.

101 Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, p. 13 (translation modified); *Nejmenší byt*, p. 25.

102 Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, p. 173; *Nejmenší byt*, p. 163.

103 On early Soviet sources, see Andy Willimott, *Living the Revolution: Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism, 1917–1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Teige repaid Ginzburg’s complement to *Stavba* when he wrote that *Sovremennnaia Arkhitektura*, ‘led by Ginzburg, the theoretical spokesperson of the new Soviet architects, and Vesnin, their radical senior whose work is so youthful, shows itself to be the most modern and most comprehensive review of modern architecture, unparalleled anywhere in the world’; Teige, *Sovětská kultura* (Prague: Odeon, 1927), p. 110. (This book bears the date 1927 on the colophon but 1928 on the cover.)

historical account of the development of housing practices, focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; this historical account was in turn framed in a discussion of the evolution of architectural functions that showed many parallels with the polyfunctionalist aesthetics being developed at the same time by Jan Mukařovský and others in the Prague Linguistic Circle (as we shall see in Chapter Five). The historical analysis held clear political-economic implications for the future: 'Everyday experience confirms Engel's assertion that capital not only cannot eliminate the housing crisis but does not wish to do so, even if it could'. Teige reached the inevitable conclusion: 'Simply by solving the housing question, we do not simultaneously solve the social question; but by solving the social question (by choosing a revolutionary way out of the crisis, i.e., by expropriating all means of production and nationalizing housing and — ultimately eliminating the antithesis between city and country), it will be possible to solve the housing question'.¹⁰⁴

Teige's assertion that the resolution to the problem CIAM posed of the 'subsistence minimum' dwelling, a problem deeply rooted in the political economy of capitalist housing dynamics, was to be found in the collective house or *koldom*, a form that in both theory and practice had been most fully developed by Soviet Constructivists, effectively bridged the avant-garde architectural discourses in western Europe and in the USSR.¹⁰⁵ This was part of a wider political strategy. Though Teige never joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia — most likely to preserve his ability to exercise independent critical judgment on cultural questions, but also perhaps to avoid getting tangled in Czechoslovak laws prohibiting certain forms of political speech — he fully respected the obligation to party discipline. (Recall his support for the orthodox Gottwald leadership in 1929.) His support for the USSR had long been exuberant: in the autumn of 1925 he had taken part in a Czechoslovak delegation that spent a month in the Soviet Union, learning about social, legislative and economic conditions and exploring cultural institutions (see Fig. 1.7). During this trip Teige had met repeatedly with figures such as El Lissitzky, Ginzburg, the Vesnin brothers, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and others, and had immersed himself in the major collections of modern art and Old Masters in both Moscow and Leningrad. While not entirely uncritical — he had noted with some disapproval the 'fetishistic' nature of the Lenin cult — Teige had left the Soviet Union starry-eyed. His travel diary ended with the words: '*Do svidania* to the lands where a new world is growing, where a new life has taken root, lands which are our true homeland, the true homeland of revolutionaries and of the proletariat'.¹⁰⁶ The detailed, first-hand

104 Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, pp. 400 and 402; *Nejmenší byt*, p. 362. A few years later Teige expressed this even more bluntly: 'A logically consistent thinking-through of the questions and tasks of modern technology leads to socialism, to recognition of the necessity of transformation of social relations. In Constructivist architecture, the technical work of construction takes on a deep social meaning'; Karel Teige, 'Vývoj Sovětské architektury' [The Development of Soviet Architecture] (1936), in Karel Teige and Jiří Kroha, *Avantgardní architektura*, ed. by Josef Čiřáňovský (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1969), pp. 9–83 (p. 43).

105 The observation holds despite the later, deeply ideological post-war cliché depicting Czechoslovakia as a 'bridge between East and West'.

106 Teige, *Deníky*, p. 678, entry dated 16 November 1925. On the Lenin cult: pp. 672–73, entry dated 9 November 1925.



FIG. 1.7. The Czechoslovak delegation in Moscow, 1925. From left: Vladimír Procházka, Josef Hora, Gabriel Hart, unknown, Bohumil Mathesius, Theodor Bartošek, Teige, and Jaroslav Seifert. Pozůstalost Jindřicha Honzla

information about the state of contemporary Soviet art and architecture Teige gained during the 1925 trip had an influence on his thought comparable to that 1922 visit to Paris, and solidified his commitment to propagating the Soviet ideal to the Czechoslovak public.¹⁰⁷ But it was Teige's main *Levá fronta* period in the early to mid-1930s that saw his most thorough propaganda efforts to 'enlighten' the Czechoslovak reading public about the Soviet ideal — or an idealized Soviet

107 The delegation was led by the poet and scholar of Russian literature Bohumil Mathesius (cousin of the linguist Vilém Mathesius, a co-founder of the Prague Linguistic Circle) and also included *Devětsil* members Seifert and Hora. The delegation published a collection of reports on cultural and sociological topics about the USSR (including several poems); see Bohumil Mathesius, ed., *SSSR: Úvahy, kritiky, poznámky* (Prague: Čin, 1926). Teige contributed a substantial study titled 'Dnešní výtvarná práce Sovětského Ruska' [Contemporary Design in Soviet Russia], pp. 119–79. The volume includes a fascinating day-by-day account of their activities (pp. 348–59). For excerpts, see Kateřina Šimová, Daniela Kolenovská, and Milan Drápala, eds, *Cesty do Utopie: Sovětské Rusko v svědectvích meziválečných československých intelektuálů* (Prague: Prostor, 2017), pp. 225–51; for context see Daniela Kolenovská and Kateřina Šimová's introductory essays in the same volume, especially pp. 61–63. On the resonance of this visit on Teige's work, see Meghan Forbes, 'A Beautiful New World: Reflections of Russian Revolution in Avant-garde Czech Print', in *Realisms of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Moritz Baßler, Ursula Frohne, David Ayers, Sascha Bru, and Benedikt Hjartason (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 279–97. See also Otakar Máčel, 'Paradise Lost: Karel Teige and Soviet Russia', in *Rassegna*, 53 (1993), 70–77.



FIG. 1.8. Teige, *Sovětská kultura* [Soviet Culture] (1927), cover design by Teige.
Private collection

Union. He edited the journals *Země sovětů* [Land of the Soviets] (1931–36) and *Praha-Moskva* (Prague-Moscow, 1936–37), conceived as outlets that would provide objective accounts to counterbalance what Teige and his editorial colleagues felt to be the negative bias against the USSR predominating in the Czechoslovak press. Teige was treading a thin line here, for his conception of ‘objectivity’ by no means implied ‘disinterestedness’: ‘Neither in *Land of the Soviets* nor now in *Prague-Moscow* have we practised uncritical, official propaganda, but rather have attempted in critical articles to analyse objectively problems of cultural, social, and economic life in the Soviet Union. But we of course wish this critical viewpoint [...] to serve as an instrument for more friendly understanding and cultural collaboration [*součinnosti*] between the Czechoslovak public and the Soviet Union’.¹⁰⁸

His 1936 article on the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial and executions demonstrates just how fragile was this balance. Teige repeatedly referred to these events as a ‘tragedy’, yet he located the tragedy not in the trials themselves but in the defection of such venerable leaders (who had been successfully ‘rehabilitated’ after previous ‘errors’) not simply to political opposition but to conspiratorial terror. As Teige ruefully conceded two years later, his article on the trial expressed ‘no lack of faith in the Soviet justice system’ and questioned neither the official account of the conspiracy nor the confessions of the defendants.¹⁰⁹ Even the most critical claims in the article were couched in acclamatory and ideologically orthodox terms:

When we know how dearly the Soviet people paid for the good will with which, in the early days after the October Revolution, counter-revolutionaries and members of the White Guard were given their freedom and, having given their word to the Soviet authorities not to take part in the fighting, then organized counter-revolutionary conspiracies and went over to the main camps of the interventionist armies, then we acknowledge that the red terror, the merciless sword of the revolution drawn by Dzerzhinsky, was the instrument of historical justice, the defence of victory, opening a perspective onto a new humanism. Today, when the difficult and anxious moments that the young Soviet state experienced during the thundering of the civil war are a thing of the past, when the successes of the second Five-Year Plan have led on the whole to the liquidation of those classes most hostile to socialism, when observing Soviet life we are reminded of Marx’s words that communism is *real humanism*, when Stalin declares that the most valuable capital are human beings, then the majority of the progressive and democratic public in the West expected that the death sentences would be commuted through amnesty, which the Soviet government gives at least to those of the accused who in the past provided service to the Russian Revolution and the Soviet lands.¹¹⁰

108 Karel Teige, ‘Skutečnost a propaganda’ [Reality and Propaganda] (1936), cited in *Výbor*, II, 622. The potential hazards of this conception of objectivity are even clearer elsewhere: ‘As friends of the Soviet Union we must, *in the interest of the whole truth*, diminish [*oslabiti*] those accounts aiming for impersonal, neutral, cold objectivity and which generally end up very positive and favourable to the USSR, and emphasize that it is not possible to achieve full comprehension of reality through mechanical objectivity, through the accumulation of dry facts’; Karel Teige, ‘Dokumenty a reportáže’ [Documents and Reports] (1931), cited in *ibid*, p. 622. One hears the creaking tension between Teige’s unconditional commitments to both the USSR and to critical independence.

109 Karel Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu*, p. 528.

110 Karel Teige, ‘Moskevský proces’, p. 346.

Teige's breezy praise for 'the merciless sword of the revolution' and for 'the liquidation of classes' is jarring, to say the least, and is stark evidence of how far he went to try to appease political orthodoxy. Indeed, this passage reads as a heaping of crude clichés offered as the price for the concluding criticism of the firing squads. Yet it was not enough. Even such cautiously framed criticism was now suspect, and without Teige or the editorial board being informed, political advisors cut Teige's article from the issue of *Praha-Moskva* in which it had already been typeset and replaced it with more commendatory material. Shortly thereafter Teige resigned his position as editor of the journal.¹¹¹ The path that within a few years would lead to Teige's complete vilification by orthodox pro-Soviet voices was becoming increasingly clear.

It is perhaps ironic that the starting point of Teige's eventual break with Soviet orthodoxy is to be found not in such political developments, but in architecture. In 1932 the competition for the Palace of the Soviets — for left-wing avant-garde architects the most prestigious commission imaginable — ended in prizes for the neoclassical and historicizing designs of Boris Iofan, Ivan Zholtovsky, and, most surprisingly, an obscure British-American architect named Hector Hamilton. As in the competition for the League of Nations Headquarters five years earlier, the avant-garde submissions were conspicuously snubbed, though this time it was impossible to blame the result on reactionary capitalist mores. The result of the competition immediately called forth passionate and embittered responses from proponents of modernist architecture across the globe, and Teige's voice sounded clearly among them:

The decision of the building commission of the Soviets has provoked indignation and disappointment because [...] all three projects awarded the highest category of prize are academicist works, architectural rubbish, especially Zholtovsky's project, a bizarre copulation between some sort of Colosseum and a Kremlin tower. Hamilton's project has perhaps a few compositional advantages, but it is a typically American building, a perfect expression of architectural imperialism.¹¹²

Two years later Teige had cooled his rhetoric somewhat, maintaining his firm opposition to the shift in Soviet architectural policy yet treating it as something that would eventually pass. He took care to specify that what he could only understand as architectural regression was not cause for any broader socio-political concern about developments in the Soviet Union: 'As far as concerns causes lying *outside* of architecture, causes emerging from social dynamics, it must be stated up front that such causes have a *positive historical content*, despite the fact that their architectural result is historically rather a negative one, due to the fault of the architects themselves. The

¹¹¹ Teige describes the episode in *Surrealismus proti proudu*, p. 528. See also Clybor, 'Socialist (Sur) Realism', pp. 151–52. The Seventh Party Congress of the KSC in April 1936 for the first time adopted the full procedure and theatrics of the contemporary Stalinist congresses in the USSR, abdicating on even the appearance of real debate, accepting resolutions unanimously, and greeting officials with ovations. See Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky*, III, 91.

¹¹² Karel Teige, 'Dvorec sovětov v Moskvě' [The Palace of the Soviets in Moscow] (1932), cited in *Výbor*, II, 635.

return to classicism in the USSR has entirely different social roots from the return to classicism propagated by fascism — this must be emphasized'.¹¹³ If the difference required emphasis, this was because the similarities were so evident. From the mid-1930s, the parallel between Stalinist and Nazi cultural policies becomes an increasingly strident theme in Teige's thought. By 1936 it was clear that Soviet neoclassicism was well entrenched (Krejcar had spent some months in Moscow in 1935 and upon his return to Prague confirmed that there was no hint of any change in the foreseeable future). Teige's analysis took on more ominous tones. The notion of 'monumentality' became central here: Teige acknowledged the argument that classicizing or historicizing monumentality was more 'comprehensible' to the wider masses, and he rehearsed the argument (citing Gottfried Semper from the mid-nineteenth century) that 'the people' (*lid*) with their 'popular [*lidově*] conceptions of beauty and wealth' intuitively understood Gothic as the appropriate style for a church, Roman classicism as most appropriate for a theatre, and so on. But, Teige countered, given the eclectic mix of often recondite historical styles that this newly conservative Soviet architectural practice drew upon (Ancient Greek, Gothic, 'Moorish', Italian Renaissance, Baroque, etc.) was it not more likely that these styles pleased the educated elite more than the mass of the proletariat, unlikely to have fond memories of visiting the Parthenon, the Alhambra, or the Duomo in Florence?¹¹⁴ Teige offered a more unsettling explanation for the 'comprehensibility' of monumental historicizing forms for the masses: 'consciously and unconsciously [the people, *lid*] have been marked by the crushing pressure of these architectural Bastilles built by feudalist and capitalist slave-drivers', for they have 'lived in their shadow for generations'. The masses are impressed by monumentality as such, not by the symbolism of particular monumental styles, and this is because they have internalized the conditions of their own oppression. Socialist architecture must not reinforce such compulsive, self-abusing admiration but rather move beyond this 'cursed inheritance'.¹¹⁵ Unstated, yet clearly implied, was that Soviet appropriation of such monumentalizing architectural idioms expressed a return to a comparable form of ruthless power and control.¹¹⁶

113 Karel Teige, 'Sovětská architektura: Obnova klasicismu' [Soviet Architecture: The Revival of Classicism], cited in *Výbor*, II, 636–37. Emphasis in the original. Originally presented as a lecture on 18 June 1934. Teige explained the turn to classicism as a 'sort of petit-bourgeois' detour resulting from an increased standard of living in the Soviet Union and the insufficient 'preparation' of much of the Soviet population for 'socialist wealth on the basis of modern technological civilization' (*ibid.* 637).

114 Karel Teige, 'Vývoj Sovětské architektury' [The Development of Soviet Architecture], *Výbor*, II, 350–65 (pp. 362–63). *Výbor* contains only Chapter 3 of the full text, which originally came out in *Vývoj Sovětské architektury* (Prague: J. Prokopová, 1936) and is reprinted in Teige and Kroha, *Avantgardní architektura*.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 363. Teige's views on monumentality thus directly contradicted the official line put forward in 1935 in the primary Soviet architectural journal, *Arkhitektura SSSR* [Architecture of the USSR]: 'the monumental architecture of the new Moscow will be majestic and simple. It will give birth to new joyful feelings between the individual and the collective'. See Katherine Zubovich, *Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 22.

116 Rostislav Švácha writes: 'After 1932, when Stalin switched tracks in the direction of mammoth

While Teige's public statements continued for some time to treat this topic as simply a matter of architectural or aesthetic debate, private documents indicate that he was already seeing the change in Soviet cultural policy as something far more menacing. In mid-1933 he wrote to his partner Jožka Nevařilová:

The more I think about it and the more I speak with Krejcar, the more it seems to me that only in the most extreme circumstances would Moscow be a solution for us, or at least for me. I think that in Moscow you might have much better and more satisfying work than in Prague, but what is going on in the areas of culture and in particular architecture and art is absolutely desperate crap [*zoufalé svinstvo*]. I don't want to go to Moscow if it means having to make compromises I have never made in Prague. But even worse: it's not just that architecture and art there are now terribly reactionary, though the word 'reactionary' does not fit at all well with our images of socialism. The main thing is my fear and concern that this reactionary development is likely the symptom of some worse and as yet unrevealed evil.¹¹⁷

A few years later, this private judgment would finally become public.

Surrealism: The Drives of the Avant-Garde

Teige's 'architectural turn' at the beginning of the Levá fronta period had been motivated by the sense of clear, direct, and positive social impact the field offered, in contrast to the ambiguous and potentially self-indulgent activities of other arts. But by the mid-1930s the clarity architecture provided was less comforting — indeed it had become disturbing. This lay behind the next major pendulum shift in Teige's interests: a turn back to artistic theory, this time under the banner of Surrealism. This shift was not as absolute as had been the turn to architecture following the collapse of Devětsil.¹¹⁸ Surrealism co-existed with Functionalism (the term Teige came to prefer over 'Constructivism') as values for Teige throughout the mid-1930s, though, in contrast to the Devětsil years, he did not make their paradoxical relationship the explicit centrepiece of his theoretical programme.¹¹⁹ It is thus left to the commentator to tease out the logic of this implicit dualism.

In many ways the relation between Functionalism and Surrealism feels even more strained, more distant, than the Constructivism–Poetism dualism of the

palatial classicism, Teige began to understand that the new, "higher" social stratum of bureaucrats and party functionaries had gained predominance in the USSR, and that the new-yet-old architecture of "socialist realism" was intended in the first instance to inspire fear and timidity among the deluded and humiliated people'; Rostislav Švácha, 'Surrealismus a architektura', p. 271.

117 Cited in Effenberger, 'Karel Teige', p. 204.

118 An important pivot point here is Teige's major, if fairly conventional, Marxist sociological analysis of the effect of market forces on modern art: Karel Teige, *Jarmark umění* (Prague: F. J. Müller, 1936); in English: Karel Teige, *The Marketplace of Art*, ed. by Sezgin Boynik and Joseph Grim Feinberg, trans. by Greg Evans, 2 vols (Helsinki: Rib-Rab Press; Prague: Contradictions/Kontradikce, 2022). This work projects many of the arguments Teige first presented in essays from the early 1920s (examined in Chapters Three and Four below) through the sociological analyses developed in his architectural studies of the early 1930s. On the contemporary relevance of this work, see Paul Wood, 'Karel Teige in the 2020s: Some Thoughts Suggested by his *Marketplace of Art*', in Teige, *The Marketplace of Art*, II, 113–33.

119 See note 90.

Devětsil years. The earlier metaphors — base and crown, method and atmosphere, equation and irrational number — became inadequate even as approximations or suggestive images. Not only do Functionalism and Surrealism simply exist side by side as independent principles governing distinct areas of activity, but each of these terms becomes more radical, more inward-looking, less forgiving, than was the case in the 1920s.¹²⁰ Even back then the strictness of Teige's Constructivism had grated on several of the architects of ARDEV, who felt that Poetist imagination and aesthetic freedom were perfectly compatible with functionalist rigour and had their place in architecture.¹²¹ In the 1920s Teige may have been unrelenting in his rejection of anything styling itself as 'Poetist architecture', but at least he understood Constructivism as inextricably linked with Poetism in his grand, optimistic vision for an emerging modern style. In the Levá fronta period, however, optimism and youthful enthusiasm had become unaffordable luxuries, and Teige's Functionalism of the 1930s was urgently focused on finding effective solutions to grave social and political crises. How this was to fit in with the exploration of unconscious instinct, erotic drives, and liberating irrationality that Surrealism undertook, was unclear.

Yet the Functionalism–Surrealism dualism does have its own internal logic. Teige's Functionalism may appear severe and doctrinaire, but it would be a mistake to view him as applying hyper-rationalist 'police measures' simply for the sake of doctrinal purity (as his interlocutors in the ARDEV debates had felt, or later Le Corbusier during the Mundaneum polemic). Perhaps the only doctrine to which Teige adhered consistently over his entire career was precisely the injunction to avoid doctrine, regulation, *a priori* principles, or anything smacking of prescription. It was this injunction against rules and doctrine that motivated Teige's lifelong disdain for artistic schools and movements, despite his own involvement in movements; it gives the logic behind the apparently oxymoronic phrases 'Poetism is not an ism' and 'Constructivism is not an ism', as well as his later position that 'Surrealism is not an artistic school'.¹²² Teige hardly suffered under the delusion that the world was fully rational, and so his strict Functionalism was not simply a hyper-rationalist doctrine. Rather, he understood Functionalism as, so to speak, a form of *listening* to the material world and responding to what it revealed. In this he differed from Ginzburg and the Soviet Constructivists, whose notion of the social condenser conceived of architecture as inculcating, shaping, or even forcing new forms of human behaviour, an impulse closer to what Boris Groys has critiqued as the 'aesthetic dictatorship' of the avant-garde.¹²³ Teige's minimum dwelling,

120 Jaroslav Anděl writes that 'once this binary compound [of Constructivism–Poetism] started to dissolve [in the 1930s] its component parts went their separate ways', and were held together solely by a shared, radical left-wing political programme; Anděl, 'The 1930s: The Strange Bedfellows, Functionalism and Surrealism', pp. 292–93.

121 See, for example, Karel Honzík, 'Estetika v žaláři' [Aesthetics Imprisoned], in *Stavba*, 5 (1926), 166–72. On the debates between Teige and Honzík, Krejcar, Vít Obrtel and others within ARDEV on the role of Poetism in architecture, see Rostislav Švácha, *The Architecture of New Prague*, pp. 275–76.

122 See Karel Teige, 'Surrealismus není uměleckou školou' [Surrealism is Not an Artistic School], cited in *Výbor*, II, 597. Originally published in an exhibition catalogue in 1935.

123 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. by

by contrast, did not coerce new behaviours but rather responded to a new reality, a reality already imposing its own set of necessities that existing architectural solutions failed to address. Architecture did not so much shape the new world as catch up with the present one. For Teige, therefore, Functionalism was less a doctrine of rationalism than a mode of attentiveness, connecting the human mind and emotions with the current state of material reality. Anything short of the most rigorous Functionalism constituted a form of deafness towards the modern world. Conversely, working intensively and creatively with material necessity meant transforming it from brutish constraint into an ally of the human spirit. Here lies the first link to Surrealism, which Teige understood also as a mode of attentiveness, though to psychic and emotional, rather than material, realities.

Indeed Teige's statements on Functionalism in the mid-1930s clearly show the implicit influence of his turn to Surrealism. The window Surrealism provided onto the complexities of the human psyche led Teige to include emotional and psychological factors among the functions with which architecture must contend. Here he paralleled arguments put forward by Jan Mukařovský around the same time criticizing the instrumental understanding of architecture as a machine serving a single function and emphasizing the multiplicity and mutability of functions in architecture, since it had to provide a 'spatial milieu' for various activities.¹²⁴ Teige viewed this broadened understanding of architectural functions as the primary distinction between 'Functionalism' and earlier understandings of 'Constructivism':

By 'Constructivism' we shall designate that earlier developmental stage of avant-garde architecture, which [...] emphasizes the constructive foundation of its forms, reduces problems of construction to technical problems, and in their solution pays heed only to utilitarian requirements. By 'Functionalism' we shall indicate a further stage of Constructivist architecture, a deepening

Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 23. Groys identifies in the avant-garde a fundamental impulse 'to "overcome the resistance" of this material [of the world] and make it pliant, malleable, capable of assuming any form'; *ibid.*, p. 3. Michał Murawski discusses the 'determinism' of the social condenser as follows: 'The pronouncements of the constructivists leave little doubt that the social condenser was intended, directly and unambiguously, to inculcate a new mode of life (a new *byt*) into its users [...]. [T]he pronouncements and practice of the constructivists make it clear that their social condensers were to be deterministic even on the level of their impact on conditioning the human psyche and perceptual apparatus'. Michał Murawski, 'Introduction: Crystallizing the Social Condenser', in *The Journal of Architecture*, 22.3 (2017), 372–86 (pp. 376–77). Amidst Teige's praise of the Soviet Constructivists of OSA for their courageous exploration of new building types such as the *koldom*, he gently criticized the occasionally 'premature' (*předčasný*), and thus forced, architectural and social assertions explored in *Sovremenniaia Arkhitektura*; see, e.g., Teige, 'Vývoj Sovětské architektury', in Teige and Kroha, *Avantgardní architektura* p. 44.

124 Jan Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions in Architecture', in Jan Mukařovský, *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and trans. by John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 236–50 (pp. 239–40). Mukařovský repeatedly invoked Le Corbusier's dictum of architecture as a 'machine for living' as the embodiment of an instrumentalist attitude towards modern architecture — ironic given Le Corbusier's defence of aesthetic functionalism during the Mundaneum polemic with Teige. On the mutual inspiration between Teige and Mukařovský here, see Květoslav Chvatík, 'Karel Teige jako teoretik avantgardy', in Květoslav Chvatík, *Od avantgardy k druhé moderně (Cestami filozofie a literatury)*, (Prague: Torst, 2004), pp. 63–104 (p. 96).

of Constructivism, a more profound recognition of the complexity of the functions of modern architecture, more precise comprehension of social tasks of building, and acknowledgement that narrow material utilitarianism can no longer provide the sole justification for architectural designs.¹²⁵

Commentators have often been misled by Teige's insistence that architecture be understood as a 'science' (*věda*), seeing this as the sign of unstinting rationalism. However, 'science' for Teige was precisely not narrow rationalism or utilitarianism, but rather a comprehensive accounting for the complexity of human experience: 'Architectural science today knows that no form or object, even if its purpose is entirely "practical", consists entirely of utilitarian or technological factors, but rather that every object of daily use plays an emotional, affective role in the life of the human psyche, and its form is marked by unconscious psychic energy'.¹²⁶ Architectural science, therefore, does not reduce its task to rational problem-solving but 'liquidates the dualism of "feeling" (*cit*) and "reason" (*rozum*) returning the sciences to vital sensuality, and the intellectual process to lyrical rapture, flame and passion'. At times this understanding of architectural science leads Teige to some odd formulations, such as when he claims that '*the socialist architect is not a construction engineer but rather an engineer of human souls*'.¹²⁷ Teige here uses the notorious phrase 'engineer of human souls', which to modern ears smacks of Stalinist totalitarianism, to identify a point of contact between rational clarity and human complexity; it is the closest Teige came in the 1930s to reformulating his earlier metaphor for the Constructivism–Poetism relation as a rational equation containing the irrational number π .

Ultimately this conception of architectural science does not stand in contrast to, but rather reaches out towards, the concerns of Surrealism. Teige could in fact easily have drawn an explicit connection between his Functionalist understanding of architectural 'science', attuned to the complexities of the human mind, and Surrealism's 'scientific' exploration of affect and the psyche, with its conviction that one could not 'simply separate art and science as if by some impassable Great Wall'.¹²⁸ So it is all the more striking that he should forego doing so. Teige seems to have accepted that such an explicitly dualist programme would inevitably just reproduce the rupture it hoped to repair. Thus, rather than positing a Functionalism–Surrealism dualism analogous to the Constructivism–Poetism dualism of the 1920s, Teige conceived of *both* Functionalism and Surrealism as independently enacting a dialectical resolution of the dualisms between feeling and reason, affect and

125 Teige, 'Vývoj Sovětské architektury', in Teige and Kroha, *Avantgardní architektura*, p. 43. See also Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 253–55.

126 Teige, 'Vývoj Sovětské architektury', p. 40. See also Irina Wutsdorff, 'Aesthetic Function and Functionalism', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 71–83 (p. 77); and Rostislav Švácha, 'Teige jako inspirátor moderní architektury — Teige jako stavebník', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, pp. 81–95 (pp. 84–85). Indeed, Mukařovský around this time also linked Constructivist architecture with Surrealism on the basis of their shared appeal to 'science'; see Jan Mukařovský, 'Estetická funkce, norma, a hodnota jako sociální fakty', in Jan Mukařovský, *Studie*, 2 vols (Prague and Brno: Host, 2007), I, 81–148 (p. 95).

127 Teige, 'Vývoj Sovětské architektury', p. 41. Emphasis in original.

128 Teige, 'Surrealismus není uměleckou školou', cited in *Výbor*, II, 598.

intellect, and art and science. Rather than each programme representing one half of an integrated whole, each represented different perspectives on the same integrative dynamic. While the larger aim of transmuting these dualisms into an integral whole remained, this was now understood as a dynamic within each programme rather than between them.¹²⁹

Teige's path to Surrealism had been a protracted one.¹³⁰ Far from jumping on the latest fashion from Paris, as his critics so often caricatured him as doing, Teige for most of the 1920s nursed strong reservations towards André Breton's Surrealist group. Teige's focus on architecture in the early 1930s meant that much of the shift in his attitude towards Surrealism took place quietly, internally, and gradually, before emerging manifestly in the spring of 1934. But it was Nezval, not Teige, who was the first among the former Devětsil colleagues to seek out and establish contact with Breton, and it was Nezval who then established the Czechoslovak 'Surrealistická skupina' [Surrealist Group] on 7 March 1934.¹³¹ Indeed, the founding document of the group, 'Surrealismus v ČSR' [Surrealism in the Czechoslovak Republic], does not even list Teige among its members, though it does proclaim the group's 'most ardent relationship to many of those who, like Karel Teige, a committed thinker of surrealism, find different, more appropriate fields for their revolutionary activity than that of integral surrealism'.¹³² Nezval, who seemed to need personalized foundation myths for his major developmental shifts, described his first meeting with Breton, during a visit to Paris together with Jindřich Honzl in May 1933, in a manner reminiscent of his romanticized description years earlier of the 'discovery' of Poetism with Teige:

In the Rue Fontaine people are folding their umbrellas. At house No. 42 we learn that Breton has just departed. I am tired. I am disconsolate. I ask Honzl if we can rest at the café on the corner of the square. We enter. We choose the first empty table. André Breton is sitting across from us. 'It's like a scene from *Nadja*', I say to the one whom I was destined to meet in my life, the one without

129 This understanding of Teige's programme in the 1930s rebuts Anděl's claim that the 'component parts went their separate ways'; Anděl, 'The 1930s: The Strange Bedfellows, Functionalism and Surrealism', pp. 292–93.

130 Karel Srp remarks that for Teige, 'rapprochement [with Surrealism] was by no means simple'; see his discussion in 'Karel Teige during the Thirties: Projecting Dialectics', in *Karel Teige: L'Enfant Terrible*, pp. 256–91 (p. 262).

131 This is the date Nezval informed the Central Agitprop of KSČ of the foundation of the group. The foundation was not publicly announced until 28 March. See 'Chronologie 1934–1938', in *Český Surrealismus*, pp. 78–93 (p. 78). See also Růžena Hamanová, 'Surrealistický most Praha–Paříž II: Stavba', in *ibid.*, pp. 94–105 (pp. 95–97).

132 The document names as members Konstantin Biebl, Bohuslav Brouk, Imre Forbath, Jindřich Honzl, Jaroslav Ježek, Katy King (pseudonym of Libuše Richterová Jílová), Josef Kunstadt, Vincenc Makovský, Jindřich Štyrský, and Toyen. It is notable that the document opens with a letter Nezval sent to Breton dated 10 May 1933, in which Nezval writes 'on behalf of Devětsil' even though Devětsil's activities had withered following the Generational Discussion and become effectively moribund after *ReD* ceased publication in 1931. See 'Surrealismus v ČSR', in *Zvěrokruh 1 — Zvěrokruh 2 — Surrealismus v ČSR — Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu — Surrealismus* (facsimile reprint, Prague: Torst, 2004 [1934, hereafter *Zvěrokruh et al.*]), pp. 115–18. For the quote about Teige, see p. 118.

whom my life would have been infinitely poorer and sadder, when we approach the table where the people who would later be our only friends meet, arriving one after another at nearly regular intervals. Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret, Max Ernst. I recognize them. It is like a scene from *Nadja*. We had gone looking for André Breton at home. I was tired. It is by chance that we entered this of all places. 'We are the same as you'.¹³³

Teige — who back in 1930 had collaborated with Nezval's quasi-surrealist journal *Zvěrokruh* (The Zodiac), which had published not only Breton's Second Manifesto of Surrealism but one of Teige's major programmatic articles — welcomed the foundation of the Surrealistická skupina and understood the reference to him in 'Surrealismus v ČSR' as a call to join in, but kept his distance for some months.¹³⁴

Teige's reservations towards Surrealism extended back to the early 1920s. He understood early Surrealism very much as an outgrowth of Dadaism, towards which he had decidedly mixed feelings. There is little doubt that Dadaism exerted a degree of direct influence on early activities within Devětsil: in particular, a significant event Devětsil staged in 1923, the 'Bazaar of Modern Art', incorporated some strikingly Dadaist gestures, most prominently a mirror in which viewers were sardonically invited to admire their own portrait.¹³⁵ But Teige's main initial response to Dadaism had been to dismiss it as a nihilistic movement, a passing phase of destructive energy that reflected the chaos of the post-war world but offered no constructive solutions. As early as 1921 Teige had raised the rhetorical question whether 'mindless Dadaism' was not simply the 'final consequence of past art and its collapse'.¹³⁶ Indeed, some of Teige's early pronouncements on Dadaism almost sound as if they had come from the pen of that great critic of modernism, Georg

133 Quoted from Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 386, note 41.

134 See Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 389. Teige wrote in mid-April: 'If I am convinced that my activities are not the result of a "surrealist intellectual disposition", it is not because I do not sympathize with Surrealism, but because I do not identify with its ideology'; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 389. Teige's major article 'Báseň, svět, člověk' (1930), later incorporated into the final chapter of *Svět, který voní*, appeared in the first issue of *Zvěrokruh*, and the Czech translation of Breton's Second Manifesto of Surrealism appeared in the second issue. See *Zvěrokruh et al.*, pp. 17–23 and 74–88 (original pagination: 9–15 and 60–74). Teige's hesitation was also due in part to lingering resentment between him and Štyrský dating back to the Generational Discussion; the two only patched up their relationship during the spring of 1935; see Srp, 'Karel Teige during the Thirties', p. 263.

135 See Jindřich Toman, 'Dada Well Constructed: Karel Teige's Early Rationalism', in *Umění*, 43.1–2 (1995), 29–33 (pp. 29–30). On Dada in Czech culture more broadly, see Jindřich Toman, 'Now You See It, Now You Don't: Dada in Czechoslovakia, With Notes on High and Low', in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan*, ed. by Stephen C. Foster (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), pp. 11–40, as well as the further bibliographical sources on p. 32, note 1.

136 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 28. Vladimír Papoušek credits Teige's 'productive misunderstanding' of Dada with influencing Czech accounts of the movement for decades; see Papoušek, *Gravitace avantgard*, p. 66. It is not known whether Teige directly experienced the famous Prague performances that formed part of the 'Dada tour' of 1920, which Richard Huelsenbeck proclaimed a great and scandalous victory; see Richard Huelsenbeck 'En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism' (1920), in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Motherwell, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 21–47 (pp. 45–47). Teige briefly notes some years later that the Dadaists had been in Prague but does not discuss the event in detail; see Teige, 'Od romantismu k dadaismu', p. 9.

Lukács: 'Dada does not build. Dada demolishes. It does not bring new truths. It tries to repudiate old doctrines [...] and] is mere preparatory work during a period of transition. [...] Dada was the product of a crisis of capitalism at its highest point, a symptom of the tense state of the metamorphosis of art searching for a new social basis'.¹³⁷ (Teige did, however, admire the spontaneous vitality that inspired Dadaism, and eventually came to appropriate the term 'Dada', and then to coin the term 'hyperdada', to designate a form of invigorating humour that had clear connections with Poetist 'felicitology' and indeed much in common with post-war notions of 'camp'.)¹³⁸ In the mid-1920s Teige linked Surrealism with his negative conception of Dadaism as 'an expression of spiritual unease, profound crisis, nervousness'.¹³⁹ It took a long time for Teige to overcome his suspicions of the political impulses within Surrealism:

Surrealists of all stripes are in their mental foundation and essential nature anarcho-communists rather than Marxists — in many cases romantic, individualist anarchists. [...] The anarcho-communist nature of these revolutionaries is the reason they are able in their programmes and manifestos to call upon both Marx and mystics, both the Comintern and oriental metaphysics, both materialism and 'absolute idealism', both Engels and Swedenborg, Lenin and Trotsky, Freudism and astrology: a mixture of revolutionary élan and passive, somnambulistic spiritualism.¹⁴⁰

Aesthetically, Teige espied such individualism and mysticism in the influence that he felt Expressionism and artists such as the Symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin exerted on Surrealist works. All this fed Teige's conviction that Surrealism, like Dada before it, merely reflected the crisis of capitalism rather than expressing a positive Marxist response to that crisis.

By the later 1920s Teige's critique of Surrealism became more nuanced and less political. He focused increasingly on the pernicious passivity that he felt underlay the emphases on chance, automatic writing, and dreamlife expressed in Breton's First Manifesto of Surrealism. One hears the echo of his earlier criticism of Dadaism as being unable to develop from destructive to constructive force when he writes: 'For the Surrealists, the creative state is not an active state, not a freely willed [*volním*] one, creativity is not the realization of a concept, not a construction. They

137 Karel Teige, 'Dada' (1926), trans. by Alexandra Büchler, in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. by Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), pp. 376–83 (pp. 378 and 380); reprinted in Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 69–91 (pp. 75 and 81).

138 See in particular Karel Teige, 'Hyperdada' (1927), in *Výbor*, I, 235–42 (p. 236). On Teige's re-evaluation of Dada see Effenberger, 'Nové umění', pp. 598–99. Teige even linked two of his important books from the later 1920s, *Svět, který se směje* (1928) and *Svět, který voní* (1930), under the series title 'O humoru, klaunech a dadaistech' [On Humour, Clowns and Dadaists]. Nonetheless, Teige continued to contrast his conception of 'hyperdada' to what he dismissed as 'literary Dada'; thus, as Toman notes, Teige appears to distinguish his own notion of Dada/hyperdada from the historical movement of Dadaism; see Toman, 'Dada Well Constructed', p. 31.

139 Teige, 'Hyperdada', p. 236.

140 Karel Teige, 'Surrealistická revoluce' [The Surrealist Revolution], in *Svět, který voní*, pp. 187 and 189–90.

note down their poems and dreams in the most passive, most receptive condition of some sort of half-sleep and half-waking; they speak from a poetic dream'.¹⁴¹ By contrast Teige insisted on the need for conscious processing of the raw material drawn up from the unconscious. He pointed to specific examples of how Devětsil members went beyond the passive activities Breton's Surrealist group undertook. Discussing the work of the Devětsil painters Štyrský and Toyen, for example, Teige contrasts 'Artificialism' (the term Štyrský and Toyen had chosen for their painting practice in the 1920s) with Surrealism precisely in terms of actively conscious mediation of the mysteries of the unconscious versus merely passive reproduction of them. Teige develops a metaphor in which he associates traditional painting, and in particular Realist painting, with reproducing only the visible spectrum of light, and he describes by contrast the Surrealists' wanderings through the unconscious as an exploration of the 'infrared' spectrum of reality, 'below' the visible world we inhabit in our waking lives. While this was a positive first step in repudiating the pretensions of Realism to provide a full representation of reality, it was for Teige insufficient. Artificialism, in Teige's extension of this metaphor, went further than Surrealism by exploring the 'ultraviolet' spectrum, 'above' the visible world, equally inaccessible to everyday perception yet irradiated and mediated by an active consciousness:

Štyrský and Toyen's pictures narrate nothing to the viewer [...] yet they are not images of dreams or hallucinations. While perhaps inspired by the unconscious, they are realized in the full light of consciousness: poems of a new reality, of new blossoms and new lights, they are like film directors of excitement and emotion, creating an ultraviolet, superconscious world.¹⁴²

Elsewhere Teige wrote:

Surrealism, granting all license to unconscious inspiration and subjective fantasy, limited itself to passive notation of the buffeting, storms, and tides of the ocean of the unconscious [*podvědomí*]. It denied the freely willed [*volní*] act of conscious creative work, of intentional construction, and sought the most faithful reproduction of unconscious activity. It renounced the white light of the intellect and shone an *infrared* glare under the horizon of consciousness. By contrast, Artificialism, together with Poetism, lives in the *ultraviolet* world of the *superconscious* [*nadvědomí*]. Creative work is not simply the activity of psychic automatism but is a freely willed [*volním*], intentional [*záměrným*] act.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁴² Karel Teige, 'Ultrafialové obrazy čili artificialismus (Poznámky k obrazům Štyrského and Toyen)' [Ultraviolet Images or Artificialism: Notes on Štyrský and Toyen's Pictures], in *Výbor*, 1, 318–22 (p. 321). Emphasis in original. Originally published alongside Teige's Second Manifesto of Poetism in *ReD*, 1.9 (1928), 315–17; this was a special issue of *ReD* titled 'Manifestoes of Poetism', indicating the importance Teige attributed to the 'ultraviolet' vision of Štyrský and Toyen's Artificialism. The third 'manifesto' contained in the issue was Nezval's 'Kapka inkoustu' [A Drop of Ink]. For Teige's application of the 'ultraviolet' metaphor to Poetism, see 'Slova, slova, slova', in *Svět, který voní*, pp. 120–22. On the relation of Teige's notion of 'ultraviolet' images to Štyrský and Toyen's own conception of Artificialism, see Josef Vojvodík, 'Ultraviolet Pictures', *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde*, ed. by Bílek et al., pp. 409–21.

¹⁴³ Karel Teige, 'Abstraktivismus, nadrealismus, artificialismus' [Abstractivism, Superrealism, and

Here and elsewhere Teige's use of the term 'free act' is a pointed one, as his use of the unusual adjective in Czech, *volní* (as opposed to *volný*, 'free') indicates. The freedom at issue here is not the 'negative' freedom of being able to do anything whatsoever but rather the activation and determinate application of the free will (*vůle*, an etymological connection Teige's use of *volní* emphasizes): a volitional act that requires active mediation through consciousness. The Hegelian echo here is evident, as Teige effectively accuses Breton's Surrealists of confusing freedom with mere arbitrariness.¹⁴⁴ One might also discern once again a parallel to Lukács in the emphasis on the importance of mediation (*Vermittlung*) through consciousness in the culturally creative act. Teige thus applies against Surrealism an argument similar to that Lukács applied against modernist and avant-garde culture as a whole: that they gave a naively 'unmediated' response to reality. At the same time Teige anticipates Adorno's hesitations (expressed in the 1950s not against but rather in defence of radically modernist culture) towards the immediacy and undialectical nature of Surrealism, which Adorno associated with both commodity fetishism and pornography.¹⁴⁵ These two components — a Hegelian understanding of freedom as an intentional, determinate act of the will, and a composite Lukácsian and Adornian understanding of consciousness as enacting a necessary mediation of the raw materials from the unconscious — form the substance of Teige's critique in the late 1920s of the 'passivity' of Surrealism.

Teige criticized the Parisian Surrealists' appropriation of Freud and psychoanalysis as well. From the mid-1920s Teige had himself become increasingly interested in incorporating certain psychoanalytic terms into his theoretical discourse. Primary among these were the notions of instinct and drives, which, as we have seen, increasingly informed Teige's conceptions of *poesie* and lyric energy that, from the time of the Second Poetist Manifesto, became ever more important for his thought. He welcomed how psychoanalytic discourse 'clarified the role of affective

Artificialism] (1928), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, II, 594–600 (p. 598). Emphases in original. Although Teige uses the term *podvědomí* [subconscious], the editors of *Výbor* note that in an archive manuscript Teige systematically changed *podvědomí* to *nevědomí* [unconscious]; I have therefore used the latter term (closer to Freud's term *das Unbewusste*) in the translation. See *Výbor*, I, 555. Also see discussions of the complexities of the term 'Unconscious' in Rüdiger Görner, 'The Hidden Agent of the Self: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of the Non-Conscious in German Romanticism', in *Thinking the Unconscious: Nineteenth-Century German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 121–39 (p. 122); and Françoise Meltzer, 'Unconscious', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McGlaughlin, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 147–62.

¹⁴⁴ This is not necessarily to claim that Teige is being consciously Hegelian here, but simply that his argument echoes the conception of freedom in works such as Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. As with Breton, Teige's glosses of Hegel often appear loose or at least strongly contentious. See, for example, Teige's questionable ascription of Hegelian lineage to key Surrealist postulates in 'Nová etapa surrealismu' [A New Stage of Surrealism] (1931), cited in *Výbor*, II, 593–94. Elsewhere he makes comparable points via what are effectively sound bites from Hegel: see Karel Teige, 'Deset let Surrealismu' [Ten Years of Surrealism] (1934), in *Výbor*, II, 139–89 (p. 149).

¹⁴⁵ See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Rückblickend auf den Surrealismus', in idem., *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 101–05; and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 128.

associations in the unconscious work of the instincts', which underlay symbols or archetypes that had a sort of pre-linguistic poetic force, deeper than the symbols that could be composed in any individual language: 'Seeing the nearly universal reach of particular symbols, we ask whether this consonance does not conform to some sort of higher reality, a superreality [*nadrealitě*] above us [...]. Might the unconscious have grasped something here that has so far eluded our consciousness and our intelligence?'¹⁴⁶ This sounds awfully close to a Surrealist position, and indeed Teige praises this 'superreal' symbolism generated by the instincts and the drives for acting 'directly and without mediation on the surface of our perceptive sensibility' — quite in contrast to his insistence elsewhere on the need for the 'ultraviolet' mediation of consciousness.¹⁴⁷ It is thus surprising that Teige criticizes Breton's Surrealists for falling frequently into 'vulgar Freudism', into 'misunderstood, disfigured Freudism', precisely because of their faithfulness to 'an exaggerated symbolism of dreams'. According to Teige:

Freud has shown that it is impossible to produce an integral, precise record of unconscious thought in any conscious or half-conscious state, that precise introspection is unachievable — indeed perhaps unachievable even in a dream-state. The unconscious thwarts clear and adequate expression: it speaks through a series of symbolic associations whose essential nature [*vlastní podstata*] remains hidden. [...] Repression [*cenzura*] renders this psychic reality inaccessible even in dreams, it disfigures it in its symbolic manifestations, which require decoding.¹⁴⁸

The material of dreams, therefore, does not provide 'true' images of our unconscious. Teige claims that the Surrealists, ignoring this radical illegibility of the unconscious, have fallen into the fallacy of 'catharsis': the conviction that merely pulling up material from dreams and similar sources and presenting it will produce some sort of aesthetic or emotional release and thus satisfaction. But 'the reproduction of a dream does not produce a poem that can affect us aesthetically'. So again, the error of the Surrealists is their failure to embrace the required mediation of consciousness: 'The Surrealist hostility to conscious lyricism, to conscious poetic creation, is their most fundamental error'.¹⁴⁹ Teige's criticism of this cathartic fallacy, his insistence on the radical alterity and inaccessibility of the unconscious, is important. Indeed in many respects he anticipates later criticism of Surrealism not only by Adorno but Sartre as well. Yet the points Teige raises against Surrealism's celebration of the direct, unmediated symbolic force of the unconscious could be levelled against many of his own formulations as well, as seen above. Teige's ambivalence regarding mediation — sometimes emphasizing mediation as the prerequisite for active, 'positive' interaction with mental reality, while at other times emphasizing immediacy as the prerequisite for *poesie* and lyric force — is a major tension in his thought during the later 1920s. The drama of his slow rapprochement with Surrealism is built largely around this plotline.

¹⁴⁶ Teige, 'Slova, slova, slova', in *Svět, který voní*, pp. 118 and 120.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁴⁸ Teige, 'Surrealistická revoluce', in *Svět, který voní*, pp. 168–69.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

By May 1934, however, that rapprochement was complete. On 11 May the Surrealistická skupina organized its first public discussion evening, where Teige stood alongside Nezval and declared that in its current stage of development Poetism (about which Teige had had precious little to say over the previous four years) was now identical with Surrealism. The Prague Surrealists were presented explicitly as the successors of Devětsil.¹⁵⁰ Teige did not present this acceptance of Surrealism as a retraction of his earlier criticisms, but rather as the result of positive developments within Parisian Surrealism itself. He claimed that following Breton's Second Manifesto (1930), in particular, the Paris Surrealists had come to a more nuanced understanding of Freud and, even more important, had proven their true commitment not just to revolution 'as such' (for Teige still an idealist formulation) but to proletarian revolution. Teige wrote: 'The Surrealists' development from dialectical idealism to Marx-Leninism and to membership in the revolutionary front was, to be sure, not a straight one; it had and continues to have its crises, detours and errors. But despite numerous missteps [...] the development is systematic, logical, genuine, and positive'.¹⁵¹ Teige compared the developmental arcs of Poetism and of Surrealism over the 1920s, including the striking parallel in the timing of their respective 'first' and 'second' manifestoes — he could not help noting that in each case the Poetist manifestoes appeared slightly earlier than the Surrealist counterparts — and presented this as two independent paths leading towards an identical point, where the two movements could now, in 1934, meet up and join forces. Teige's developmental schema thus sought to counter any implication that the Prague Surrealists had simply seized upon a cultural fashion from abroad. On the contrary, Teige made clear that Poetism, with its more sure-footed commitment to proletarian revolutionary discipline from its earliest phase, had had a less difficult developmental route to travel to the present moment of convergence.¹⁵² If anything, Prague had shown the way for the Parisians, not the other way round.¹⁵³

The high point of this joining of forces, at least in terms of public visibility, came when the Surrealistická skupina hosted Breton, Paul Éluard, Jacqueline Breton, and the Paris-based Czech painter Josef Šíma in Prague (see Fig. 1.9). This visit, which lasted from 27 March to 10 April 1935, included many of the activities typical for tourists in Prague — visits to the Prague Castle and its Golden Lane, a day trip to the west Bohemian spa towns Karlovy Vary and Mariánské Lázně, and plenty of socializing. (Some entrances in Nezval's diaries suggest that he may have found picking up the restaurant and hotel bills for his guests rather burdensome.)¹⁵⁴ But there was work to do as well. Breton gave a series of public lectures, several of

150 On the convergence of Poetism and Surrealism, see Teige, 'Deset let Surrealismu', in *Výbor*, II, 163. On the Surrealist Group as a reinvention of Devětsil, see 'Surrealisté v Československu' [The Surrealists in Czechoslovakia] (1934), cited in *Výbor*, II, 595.

151 Teige, 'Deset let Surrealismu', in *Výbor*, II, 157.

152 See Teige, 'Deset let Surrealismu', in *Výbor*, II, 152–57. Teige had emphasized the chronological primacy of Poetism over Surrealism even in earlier texts: see Teige, *Svět, který se směje*, p. 240.

153 On this development, see also 'Poetismus v genetickém plánu surrealismu', in Žoržeta Čolaková, *Český surrealismus 30. Let: Struktura básnického obrazu* (Prague: Karolinum, 1999), esp. pp. 61–68.

154 See the excerpts cited in Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 396.



FIG. 1.9. Paris Surrealists in Prague: André Breton, Jacqueline Breton, Teige, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, Paul Éluard. Spring 1935. Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archives

which are now acknowledged as key documents of the Surrealist movement. First was ‘Surrealist Situation of the Object’, delivered on 29 March at the building of the Mánes artists’ union, where Breton opened with a paean to Prague and an encomium to his hosts:

Let me say that for me it is a special pleasure to bring the world of new shadows that goes by the name of Surrealism and the sky of Prague together. But I must admit that it is not only the more phosphorescent color of this sky at a distance as compared to that of so many others that makes me feel that my task is particularly easy: I also know that for many long years I have enjoyed perfect intellectual fellowship with men such as Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige, whose trust and friendship is a source of pride to me. I know too that through

their efforts here everything about the origins and the successive stages of the Surrealist movement in France has been made perfectly clear to you, this being a movement whose development they have never ceased to follow very closely. Constantly interpreted by Teige in the most lively way, made to undergo an all-powerful lyric thrust by Nezval, Surrealism can flatter itself that it has blossomed in Prague as it has in Paris.¹⁵⁵

Subsequently Breton delivered his talk 'The Political Position of Today's Art: The Social Activity of Surrealism' on 1 April at Prague's Municipal Library. Talks in Brno, both live and by radio broadcast, followed thereafter. This visit received considerable coverage in the cultural press in Czechoslovakia and resulted in a bilingual publication, the *Bulletin international du surréalisme / Mezinárodní buletin surrealismu*, published by the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group and dated 9 April 1935.¹⁵⁶

Over the next few years this Prague-Paris collaboration would prove extremely fruitful, and Prague emerged as an important centre of an increasingly internationalized Surrealism.¹⁵⁷ Czech editions appeared of a range of works in particular by Breton and Éluard, often with covers and typography designed by Teige. (Translations in the other direction were, perhaps inevitably, not quite as frequent, but work by Nezval did appear in French translation.) For Teige, however, the most consequential creative outcome of this period was perhaps the expansion of his work as a graphic artist. Since that time when, as a teenager, Teige had effectively banished himself from the ranks of visual artists (despite professional successes that would have heartened many an aspiring artist), he had, in fact, never ceased to exercise and develop his talents as a graphic designer (as Devětsil member Adolf Hoffmeister teasingly depicted; see Fig. 1.10). But he kept a tight leash on himself, sticking to fields of visual culture generally considered modest: following his experiments in the 'picture-poem' genre in the early Poetist period, he worked first and foremost in book design and typography. He integrated these activities with his theories about architectural design and shifting modes of cultural consumption and production, often giving them deep intellectual resonance (see Figs 1.11–1.13 and 1.9; the *Intermezzo* will examine some significant examples in

155 André Breton, 'Surrealist Situation of the Object', in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 255–78 (p. 256). Breton also hailed Toyen, Štyrský, Biebl, Makovský, Brouk, Honzl, and Ježek (though several of these names are misspelled in the English edition). One can only speculate whether Teige may not have winced inwardly when Breton described Prague as the 'magic capital of old Europe' (ibid., p. 255), a phrase tinged with the mysticism Teige had criticized about Surrealism years earlier.

156 For further detail on this visit, see Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 395–99; and Derek Sayer, *Prague: A Surrealist History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 13–32. The *International Bulletin of Surrealism* is reprinted in *Zvěrokruh et al.*, pp. 121–32. Due to organizational complications the Czechoslovak group did not participate in the second and third *International Bulletins*, prepared in Tenerife and Brussels later the same year.

157 See Hamanová, 'Surrealistický most Praha-Paříž II'. On the internationalization of Surrealism, see Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, eds, *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), though the volume is more informative about the expansion of Surrealism beyond Europe than about the Czechoslovak group.



FIG. 1.10. Adolf Hoffmeister, 'Typographic design by Karel Teige', caricature, 1927.
Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collection;
by kind permission of the heirs of Adolf Hoffmeister

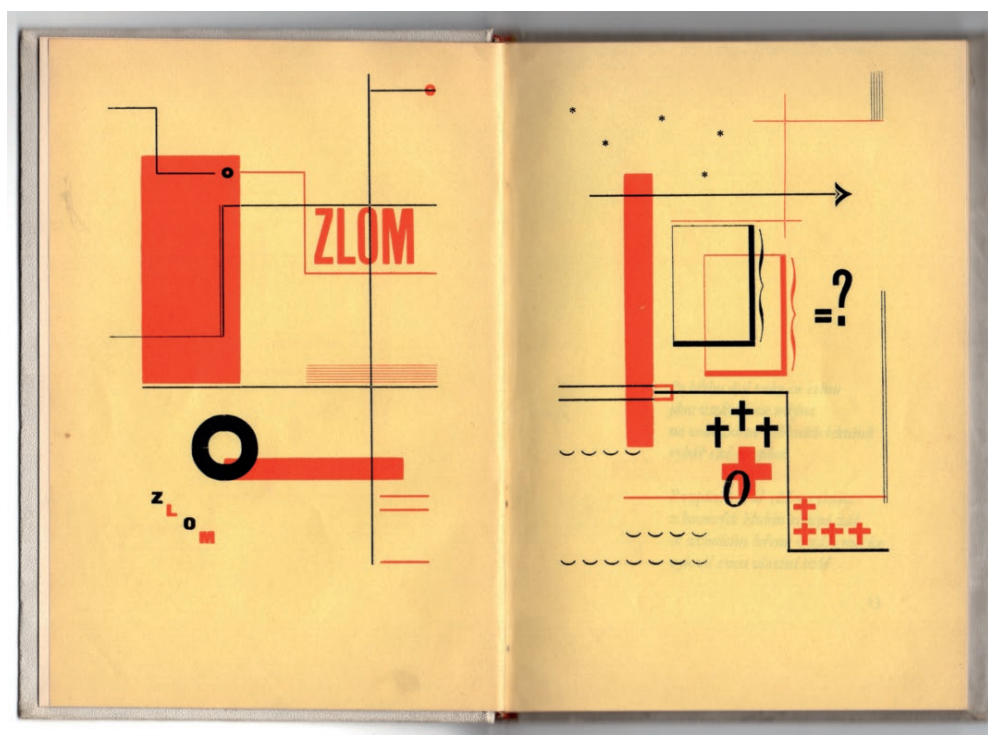


FIG. 1.11. Teige, typographic compositions for Konstantin Biebl, *Zlom* [Rupture] (1928). Private collection

closer detail). But the subordination of this graphic work to functional imperatives of ‘book construction’ was always clear. Beginning in 1935, however, Teige began to experiment with photomontage in a Surrealist idiom, and he developed this activity throughout the war and beyond, creating what by the time of his death was an enormous body of striking artworks (see Figs 1.14–1.17).¹⁵⁸ Teige employed some familiar Surrealist motifs: the striking juxtaposition of mismatched elements, or the eroticized female body that was such a common conceit of the overwhelmingly male gaze of interwar Surrealism.¹⁵⁹ Many of Teige’s collages juxtapose images of nature

¹⁵⁸ Some 374 works have survived. Michalová reproduces a generous selection: see *Karel Teige: Captain*, pictorial appendix, pp. 94–142. See also Esther Levinger, *Constructivism in Central Europe: Painting, Typography, Photomontage* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 238–63; Karel Teige, *Surrealistická koláž / Surrealist Collages, 1935–1951*, ed. by Rumjana Dačeva, Simeona Hošková, Vojtěch Lahoda, Karel Srp, and Květa Otcovská (Prague: Památník národního písemnictví and Středoevropská galerie a nakladatelství, 1994); Toman, *Foto/montáž tiskem*, Chapter 3; Witkovsky, ed., *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007), p. 38; Vojtěch Lahoda, ‘Karel Teige’s Collages, 1935–1951: The Erotic Object, the Social Object, and Surrealist Landscape Art’, trans. by David Chirico, in *Karel Teige: L’Enfant Terrible*, ed. by Dluhosch and Švácha, pp. 292–323; and Karel Srp, ‘Collage as Simultaneity and Contradiction: The Pictorial Conceptions, Quotations, and Paraphrases of Karel Teige’, in Teige, *Surrealistická koláž / Surrealist Collages, 1935–1951*, pp. 19–34.

¹⁵⁹ See, e.g., Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 20–32.

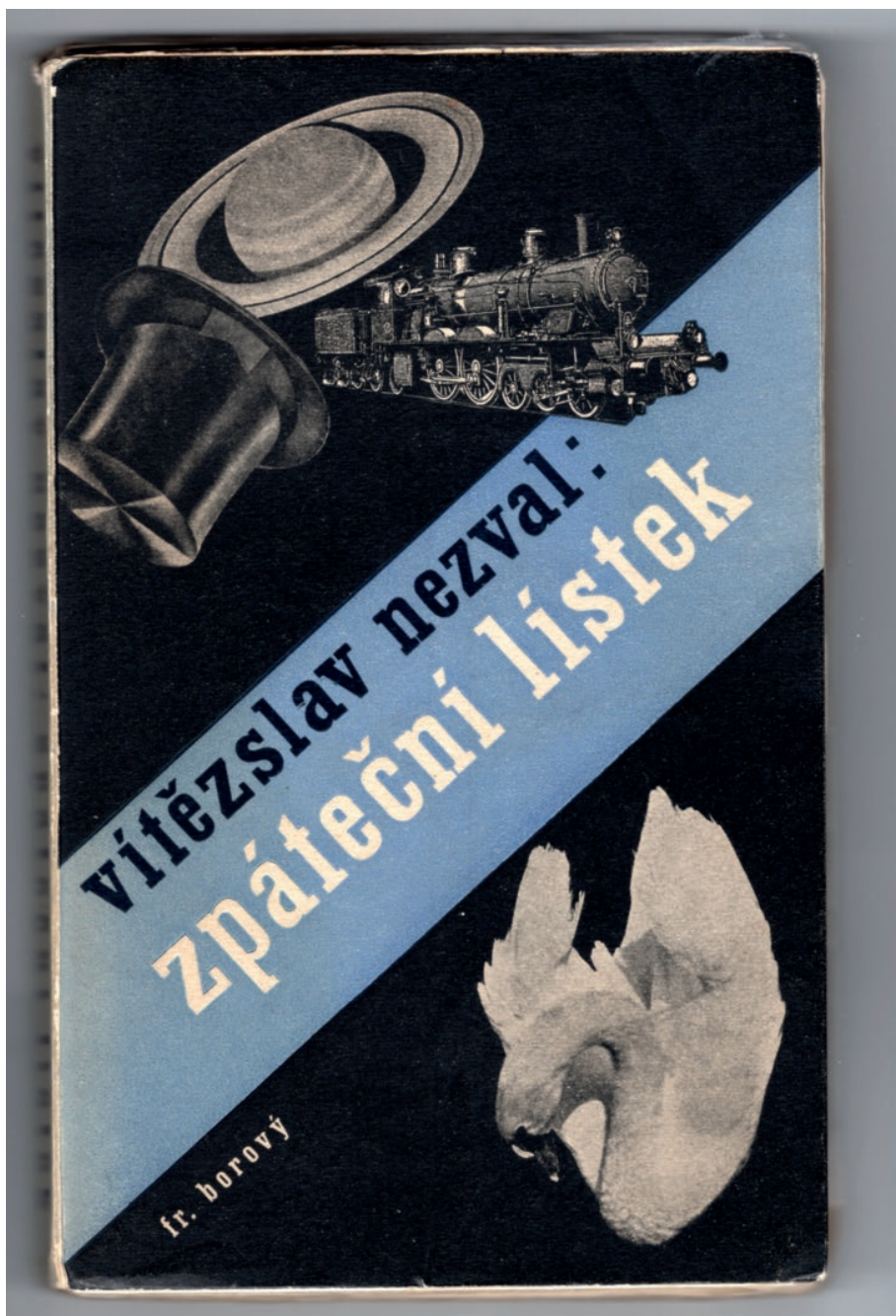


FIG. 1.12. Teige, cover for Nezval's *Zpáteční lístek* [Return Ticket] (1933).
Private collection

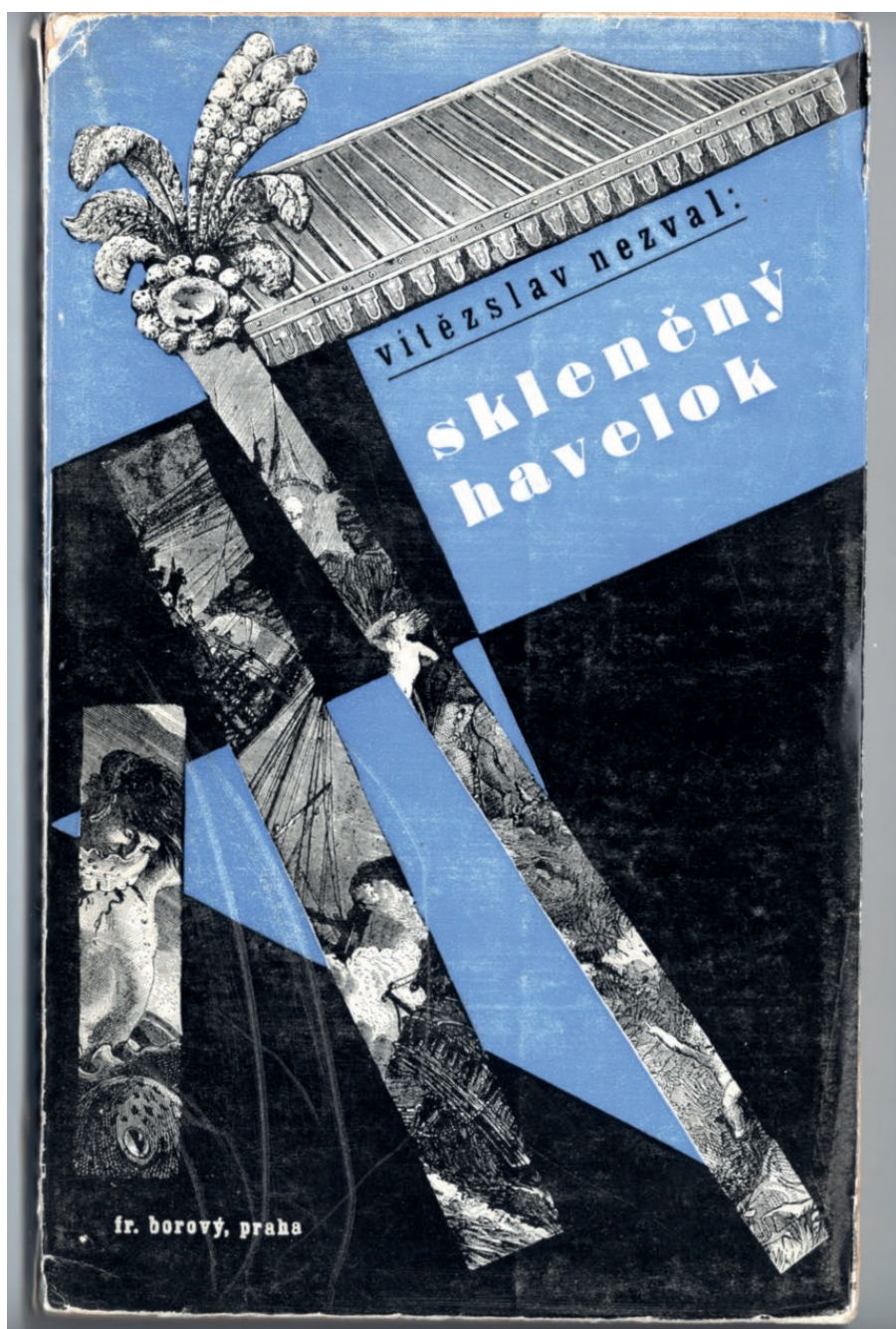


FIG. 1.13. Teige, cover for Nezval's *Skleněný havelok* [Glass Inverness Cloak] (1932). Private collection

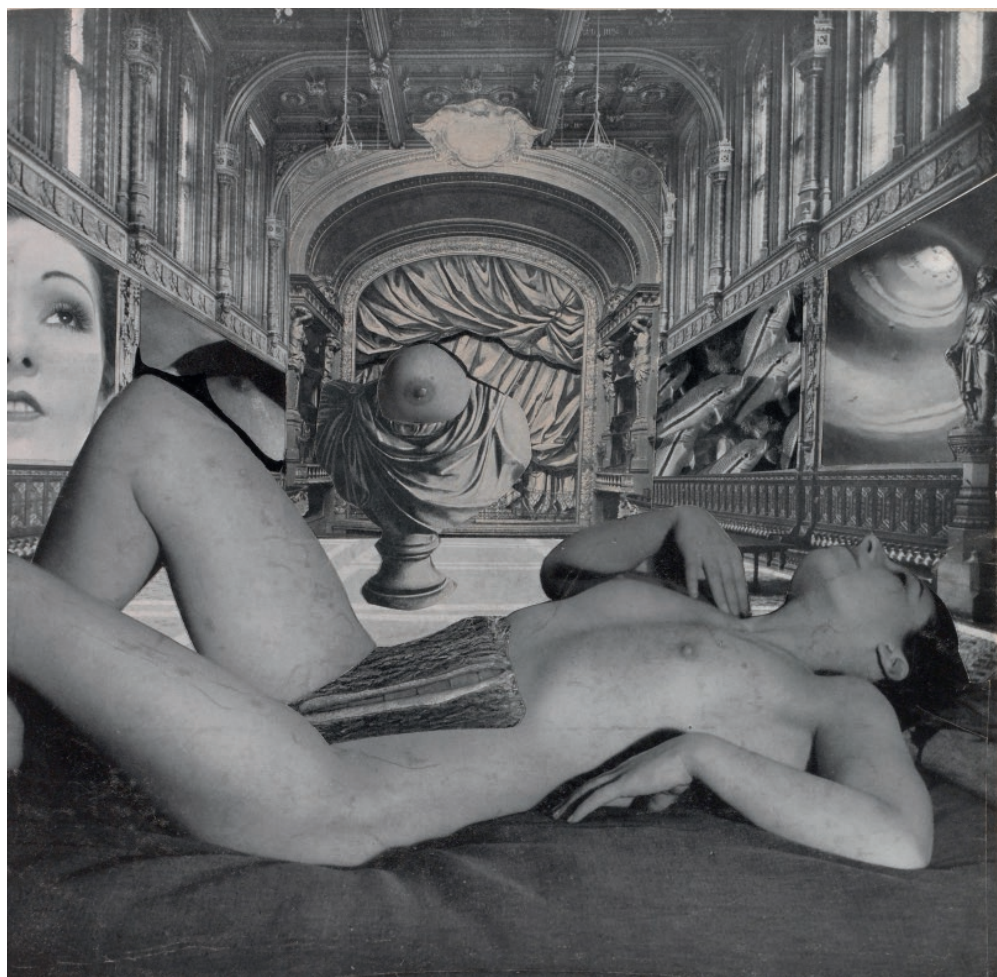


FIG. 1.14. Teige, Collage No. 47 (1938).
Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collections



FIG. 1.15. Teige, Collage No. 115 (1939).
Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collections

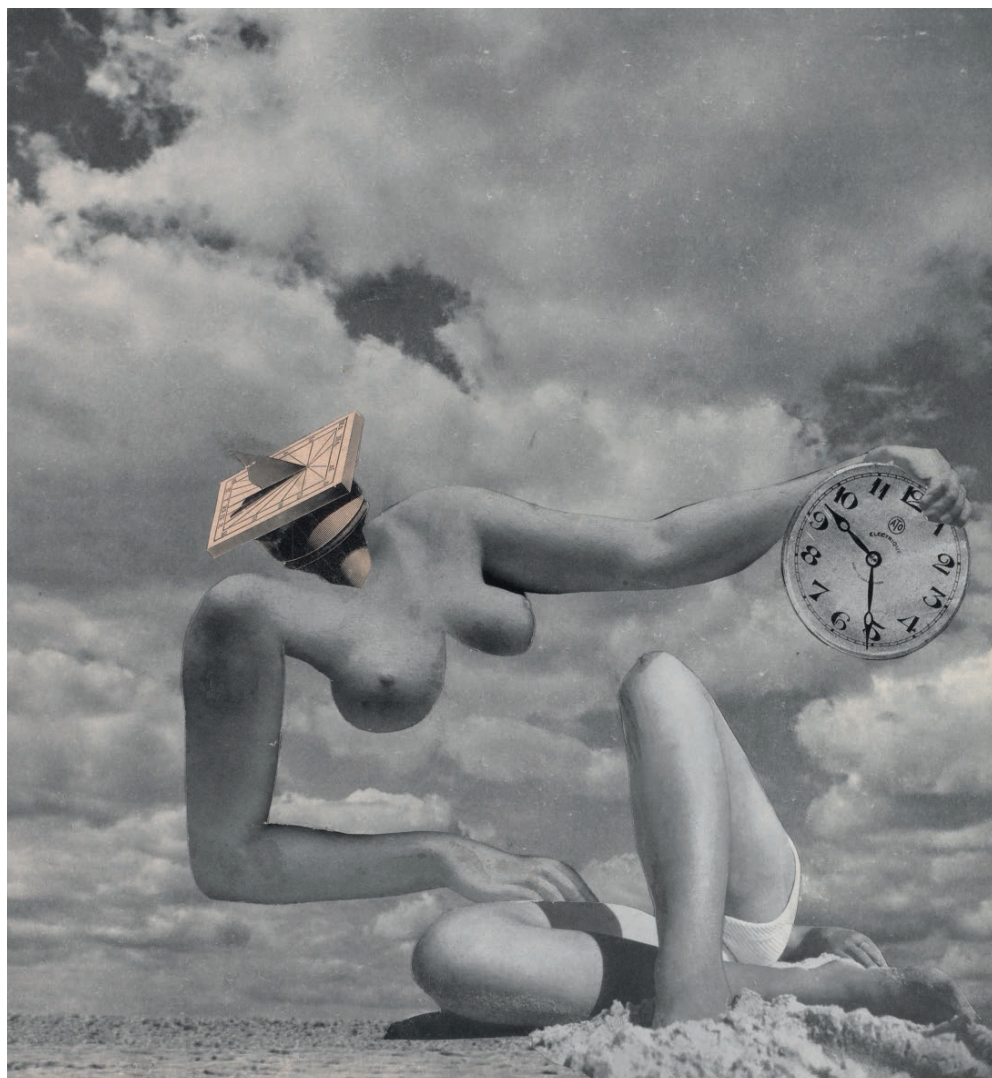


FIG. 1.16. Teige, Collage No. 280 (1943).
Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collections



FIG. 1.17. Teige, Collage No. 323 (n.d.).
Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collections

and human culture in ways that put that distinction in question. Nonetheless Teige's photomontages are, arguably, more often characterized by their compositional coherence and oddly persuasive logic. Rather than jarring or bewildering, the images appear natural, almost self-evident, as if Teige were himself making use of an 'ultraviolet' visual mode.

But the Surrealist period in the second half of the decade had an ominous side as well. Though Teige denied it for as long as possible, the Surrealistická skupina had from its very foundation been entangled in two distinct political struggles: against capitalism and fascism, of course; but equally against a communist party that was not simply indifferent but increasingly hostile to its activities. The Parisians may have envied the degree to which their colleagues in Prague appeared to have a substantive footing within the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, but the truth was that from the very beginning of its activities the Surrealistická skupina expended an extraordinary amount of energy and column space in its publications attempting to win over official representatives of cultural policy within the Party.¹⁶⁰ The group's very first public document, the flyer 'Surrealism in Czechoslovakia', opens with an appeal to comrades in the Central Agitprop of the KSČ (a sure sign the Prague Surrealists sensed the risk of rejection or misunderstanding) in which, while declaring their solidarity with communist writers of more traditional practice, they insisted on their independence to pursue radical experiments, invoking in support of such independence no less an authority than Joseph Stalin.¹⁶¹ The group's delusions about the success of their persuasion campaign were considerable. In 1935, shortly after the visit from Breton's group, Nezval assessed the 'situation of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia' as follows:

What mattered first and foremost to the Surrealist Group was the effort to defend Surrealism in the eyes of the responsible theoreticians and practitioners of the Marxist-Leninist ideological and political movement, and to prove that no discrepancy exists between Surrealism and dialectical materialism. The *International Bulletin of Surrealism* [see note 156] meticulously documents that this question has been fully answered and closed, in particular thanks to the solidly grounded interventions of Závěš Kalandra, who is, as far as we are aware,

160 Breton's group had long had a very rocky relationship with Communist Party officials both in France and in the USSR. See, for example, Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), especially Chapters 5 to 7. During his 1935 visit to Prague Éluard wrote to his ex-wife: 'This visit is a revelation. There are several very wonderful people here: above all Nezval and Teige; two painters: Štyrský and Toyen (a very interesting woman) create delightful paintings and collages; one sculptor: Makovský. Although not too numerous, their "radiance" and their influence are so great that they are forced to rein it in. Their position within the Communist Party is exceptional. Teige heads the only communist review in Czechoslovakia. Every issue contains one or several articles on Surrealism'; cited in Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 395.

161 See 'Surrealismus v ČSR', in *Zvěrokruh et al.*, p. 115. As Josef Vojvodík has pointed out, however, members of the Surrealistická skupina at times engaged in ideological distortions comparable to those of orthodox Marxists critics of that time, such as in their highly contentious presentation of the 'revolutionary Romantic' Karel Hynek Mácha in their anthology marking the 100th anniversary of the death of the great Czech Romantic poet. See Josef Vojvodík, 'Četba jako deformování a permanentní zraňování textu: Několik poznámek ke koncepci máchovského sborníku *Ani labuť ani Lůna* (1936)', in *Český surrealismus, 1929–1953*, ed. by Bydžovská and Šrp, pp. 219–35 (p. 235).

the first among professional politicians to appreciate duly the contribution of André Breton's *Communicating Vessels* to the neglected 'formal side' of historical materialism.¹⁶²

Even without the benefit of hindsight Nezval's declaration that the question was 'closed' displayed a remarkable degree of blindness; with hindsight it assumes grotesque dimensions, given Kalandra's fate at the hands of the KSČ after the war.¹⁶³ In 1934, to be fair, it had still been possible to conduct a fairly civil debate about the relation of Surrealism to the new official policy of Socialist Realism, and for Teige to co-edit with Ladislav Štoll a volume on these Surrealism debates (a collaboration that has itself come to seem surreal given Štoll's role in setting the template for Teige's official vilification in 1950).¹⁶⁴ The Surrealistická skupina was officially under the umbrella of the Levá fronta, which also included factions that were far more aesthetically traditional and politically orthodox, and for some time in the mid-1930s everyone's priority was to maintain left-wing solidarity against fascism. But no questions regarding the broader acceptance of Surrealism were 'closed', and indeed the direction the 'responsible theoreticians and practitioners of the Marxist-Leninist ideological and political movement' were moving was clearly not favourable for the Surrealists. Teige's 1936 brush with the party censors over his criticism of the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial provided stark evidence of the limits of 'independence'. Then in 1937 the fragile sense of solidarity on the Left began to collapse precipitously during public debates regarding André Gide's *Retour de l'URSS* (1936), which contained criticisms of Soviet society that sharply divided supporters of the USSR.¹⁶⁵ While disagreeing with many of Gide's particular points, Teige came out strongly in his defence during a public debate and argued vigorously for the necessity of free, critical discourse:

The view that any criticism of the country that has implemented the revolution is a heretical and counter-revolutionary act is in fundamental conflict with the nature of revolutionary socialism. [...] To believe that by silencing criticism and hiding ideological conflicts we can achieve a desired conformism of thought within the socialist camp, or to proclaim that criticism and debate weaken the movement's force and authority, would be a truly nauseating standpoint. [...] Authority that does not allow criticism is perverse.¹⁶⁶

162 Vítězslav Nezval, 'Situace surrealismu v ČSR' [The Situation of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia], in *Zvěrokruh et al.*, pp. 140–42 (pp. 140–41); original pagination pp. 4–7.

163 On the judicial murder of Kalandra, see Jaroslav Bouček, *27.6.1950 — Poprava Závaře Kalandry: Česká kulturní avantgarda a KSČ* (Prague: Havran, 2006).

164 See 'Surrealismus v diskusi', ed. by Teige and Štoll. Further substantive debate between the camps appeared in *Socialistický realismus* (Prague: Knihovna Levé fronty, 1935). Štoll's 1950 address to the Czechoslovak Writers' Union conference (see note 3) was published as *Třicet let bojů za českou socialistickou poezii* [Thirty Years of Struggle for Czech Socialist Poetry] (Prague: Orbis, 1950) and set the orthodox line for decades regarding which writers were to be celebrated and which silenced or denounced.

165 The Gide Affair caused controversy in left-wing circles across Europe; see Ludmilla Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 29–31.

166 Cited from Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 403–04, and see also pp. 407–12. Teige's contribution to this 14 January 1937 public discussion evening about Gide was never published, but

Devětsil's early ally, S. K. Neumann, now astonishingly shrill in his obdurate and reductive conception of communist culture, took the lead in this polemic and over the course of 1937 and into 1938 made Teige, the Surrealistická skupina, and many of the Czech modernist painters in the Mánes artists' union such as Emil Filla, prime targets during his virulent attacks on Gide and on 'decadent' modernist culture as a whole (see note 25). Teige responded by comparing Neumann's rhetoric to that of Goebbels. The 'situation of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia' had become dire.

Worse was soon to come. On 11 March 1938 Nezval dropped a bomb: following a bitter quarrel at a meeting with the other members of Surrealistická skupina, Nezval abruptly informed one of the leading communist newspapers that he was single-handedly disbanding the Surrealist group, which he claimed he could do since he was its founder. The quarrel that had led to this thunderbolt emerged from Nezval's conversion to the Party-line obedience that the Surrealists, Teige foremost among them, had been resisting for the past several years. The argument had quickly turned personal and ugly. Teige described it as follows:

In the presence of five members of the group and several close friends, Nezval instigated a discussion in which he said that we must approve of even such actions by the Soviet regime as the death sentences of the Moscow Trials or the dissolution of Meyerhold's theatre, which he claimed was a front for spy activities (!!!). He labelled a scientific group in which several of our friends are active [the Prague Linguistic Circle — PZ] as suspicious, as something associated with international Jewry — without blushing Nezval used chauvinist and antisemitic phrases, addressed in particular to one of our friends who was not present and who would not pass muster under the Aryan laws. [...] He closed his speech, which could be considered delirious if it were not a clear expression of a conscious intent, with offensive attacks on E[mil] F[rantišek] Burian, B[ohuslav] Brouk, and J[indřich] Štyrský, using arguments to which Štyrský, in view of the temperature of the debate, could not offer a 'merely theoretical' answer.¹⁶⁷

The likely implication that Nezval was using homophobic slurs and the enumeration of his antisemitic vulgarities make clear that Teige saw the argument going far beyond artistic or even political differences, as dramatic as those may have been, for Nezval had adopted the sort of crass invective that Neumann was practising and that precluded any possibility of reasoned debate. Together with Teige, Nezval had until then represented the most prominent figurehead of the interwar Czech avant-garde, and the two had been friends since first meeting early in 1922; so this was not just any professional altercation but an exceptionally painful personal rift, more strident and more damaging even than the Generational Discussion had been eight years earlier.

Not surprisingly, the other members of the Surrealistická skupina did not recognize Nezval's right to dissolve the group, regarding it as an empty 'autocratic'

the manuscript was preserved and is printed in *Výbor*, II, 626–31.

167 Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu*, p. 503. Cited from Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 413, with some material added.

gesture, and a feisty exchange ensued in the cultural press.¹⁶⁸ Teige followed up with a polemical pamphlet that constitutes his final major work before the outbreak of the war, *Surrealismus proti proudu* (Surrealism against the Current). This slim booklet contains two parts. First was a reckoning with Neumann and other line-toeing Party critics who with blind obedience — as Teige sarcastically repeated, mocking Neumann's phrase — applauded any and all Party directives 'clearly and without reservation'.¹⁶⁹ Second came Teige's account of the Nezval Affair, not only tracing the statements and actions of all parties involved but also diagnosing Nezval's motivation for initiating the conflict. Teige discusses the 52 *Bitter Ballads of the Eternal Student Robert David* (1936) and subsequent 100 *Sonnets of Robert David* (1937), works of traditional ballad and sonnet form (and for Teige utter kitsch) that had been published anonymously but were later revealed to be by Nezval, as well as Nezval's 'monumentalizing' and 'apotheosizing' sonnets celebrating Stalin, and argues that such works revealed that Nezval was suffering from a creative crisis that had led to his inner alienation from Surrealism.¹⁷⁰ But Teige subordinated such polemics to two overriding themes. First was a full-throated defence of 'artistic and scientific freedom', which, more than any particular differences of judgment between the hostile camps, Teige saw as the fundamental question that separated them.¹⁷¹ He wrote: 'We cannot constrain the fundamental right of socialist criticism to freedom of expression in the way Nezval does. [...] Socialist and Marxist criticism bases its judgments on socialist and Marxist criteria [*sudidla*]; it is not legitimated through a positive relation to this or that object of criticism but through its conceptual foundation.'¹⁷² The second was the explicit comparison of Stalinist and Nazi cultural policy, with all that that implied. Both were marked for Teige by an identical hostility to modernist culture, rejected as 'decadent formalism' in one case and 'degenerate art' (*entartete Kunst*) in the other.¹⁷³ The conviction that had been building since the early 1930s, when Teige first identified parallels in the turn from modernist architecture in the Soviet Union and in fascist Germany, now became complete. These two themes — of comparable hostility to freedom of expression and of comparable retreat to retrograde, monumentalizing, and atavistic forms of cultural expression — came together in Teige's emphasis on an identical process of *Gleichschaltung* (Teige uses the term *glajchšaltování*) taking place in Soviet and Nazi culture and society. Several commentators have thus regarded Teige's

168 Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu*, p. 507. Teige pointed out that Surrealism by nature refused to acknowledge the 'Leadership principle' (*vůdcovský princip*); loc. cit.

169 The death sentences in the Moscow Trials and the closing of Meyerhold's theatre were Teige's two main examples of indefensible actions that the Party insisted be applauded 'clearly and without reservation'; see *ibid.*, pp. 479–80.

170 See *ibid.*, pp. 511–17.

171 See Vratislav Effenberger's sobering comments on the irreconcilable foundation of this clash; Effenberger, 'Karel Teige', pp. 211–12.

172 Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu*, pp. 478 and 526.

173 Teige wrote: 'Neumann's criticism of the new art is in spirit, style, and terminology identical to Nazi aesthetics, the directives of which were given by the *Führer* in his well-known speech about art. By juxtaposing Neumann's words with those of the Nazi *Kulturträger* we could show nearly literal concurrence'; *ibid.*, p. 485.

Surrealismus proti proudu as anticipating the sort of critique of totalitarianism put forward shortly thereafter by figures such as Arthur Koestler and Isaac Deutscher.¹⁷⁴ However that may be, the booklet confirmed Teige's status as *persona non grata* for Stalinist authorities, and after the end of the war cast a long, dark shadow over his remaining years.

The Nezval Affair effectively brought the Czech interwar avant-garde to a close. The next few months saw political crises that far outweighed any arguments about left-wing culture. On 30 September 1938 the Munich Agreement ceded the so-called Sudetenland border regions of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, and in March the following year German military forces occupied the western part of the country and a Nazi client state was established in Slovakia. The interwar Czechoslovak Republic in which Teige's career had flourished ceased to exist even before the shooting war began on 1 September 1939. At the beginning of the war Teige decided against emigration (friends had made tentative arrangements for a teaching position for him in the United Kingdom) but did go into hiding for a period, as the Gestapo was targeting many prominent cultural figures for abduction or persecution. The artists Emil Filla and Josef Čapek, for example, were both sent to concentration camps (Filla survived, Čapek did not), and Vladislav Vančura, Teige's former colleague from Devěsíl, was executed in June 1942 for anti-fascist activity. Organized avant-garde activity was of course impossible during the war years, though Teige managed to support himself through some design commissions and writing contracts (some of which may have been fictions through which certain left-wing publishers supported authors without other sources of income); he remained the acknowledged leading spirit of the avant-garde but published little.¹⁷⁵ While Teige began assembling materials during these years for what would become a projected ten-volume *Phenomenology of Art*, continued to produce Surrealist collages, and made new contacts with younger artists working clandestinely, he suffered from intense depression. In an August 1944 letter to his friend Maria Pospíšilová he wrote: 'The days come and go; all is equally monotonous. [...] It is not that I don't have the time: In fact I have so much time that it is a downright burden; I don't know what to do with it. But all that free time is somehow grey and monotonous, and the boredom that comes from this prevents me from concentrating on anything — neither work nor reading... It is so barren and empty in my head'.¹⁷⁶

The Czechoslovakia that emerged after the end of the war was a vastly altered country in a vastly altered world. For a few years Teige was able to resume his editorial and theoretical activity, publishing a book on modern architecture in Czechoslovakia and working on his ambitious *Phenomenology of Art* — the work he strove unsuccessfully to finish before his death — recasting his dualism one final time and tracing the emergence of modern art through a nuanced antinomy

174 See for example Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 416, who also cites in this regard Ivan Pffaff, *Česká levice proti Moskvě, 1936–38* (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1996), p. 116.

175 See Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, pp. 458–67. See also Martin Lukáš, 'Skrytá avantgarda', in *Dějiny české literatury a Protektorátu Čechy a Morava*, ed. by Pavel Janoušek et al. (Prague: Academia, 2022), p. 319.

176 Quoted from Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain*, p. 466.

of 'Realist' and 'Irrealist' dynamics, inspired in many respects by both the Vienna School and Mukařovský's structuralist aesthetics.¹⁷⁷ But in his final years he was the target of an increasingly wrathful campaign against everything he had worked for in Devětsil and the Surrealistická skupina. Teige himself felt he was witnessing 'the end of a world, of a civilization'.¹⁷⁸ Before his death, however, he became a motivational figure for a small number of young Surrealists who were emerging during and after the war, whose lives and activities over the following decades would unfold under the pressures of censorship and employment bans: the avant-garde was forced underground.¹⁷⁹ One member of that next generation, Vratislav Effenberger — who would become one of the editors of Teige's *Selected Works* (*Výbor z díla*) in the 1960s, itself a publishing venture that became a politicized act — summarizes the post-war coda to Teige's career thus: 'a great historical period ends here, in every sense; here ends the history of the postimpressionist avant-garde, here something essential changes in the very concept of the avant-garde. While groups and movements emerge after the war, they would lack that consciousness of the social function of creative work, the integrative consciousness through which an artistic method becomes a view on the world as a whole'.¹⁸⁰ Thus by the time of his death, Teige's great ambition to describe the integrity of the avant-garde had passed into the realm of history, to survive him only as myth.

177 The surviving fragments of Teige's *Phenomenology of Art* are contained in *Výbor*, III, 417–86, and in Karel Teige, *Vývojové proměny v umění* [Developmental Shifts in Art], ed. by Vratislav Effenberger (Prague: NČSVU, 1966). Also see the discussion in Chvatík, 'Karel Teige jako teoretik avantgardy', pp. 91–98.

178 Letter to Marie Pospíšilová, 21 June 1948, quoted in *Výbor*, III, 645. This letter is an expression of intense anguish: 'I am as it were at home in my depression ... I can say that I have adapted to it and taught myself to be perfectly resigned. All optimism, all hope, is nothing other than a miserable narcotic that brings renewed disappointment and a worse hangover. By contrast: radical pessimism and the most apathetic indifference to the goings-on of the outer world — that is the best medicine. [...] I know that life no longer has any meaning, though I have not thought and am not thinking of suicide'.

179 See Vratislav Effenberger, 'Karel Teige', pp. 219–22; Alena Nádvořníková, 'Poslední rok Karla Teigeho (Sborníky Znamení zvěrokruhu)', in Alena Nádvořníková, *K surrealismu* (Prague: Torst, 1998), pp. 107–26; Anja Tippner, *Die Permanente Avantgarde? Surrealismus in Prag* (Köln: Böhlau, 2009); and Marie Langerová, Josef Vojvodík, Anja Tippnerová and Josef Hrdlička, *Symboly obludnosti: Mýty, jazyk, a tabu české postavantgardy 40.–60. let* (Prague: Malvern, 2009).

180 Effenberger, 'Karel Teige', pp. 214–15. Zdeněk Pešat has written that 'the fate of Teige's selected works has been as convoluted as the destiny of his oeuvre itself'; Zdeněk Pešat, 'Mezi surrealismem a fenomenologií umění', in Zdeněk Pešat, *Tři podoby literární vědy* (Prague: Torst, 1998), pp. 231–35 (p. 231).

CHAPTER 2



Teige, Dualisms, and ‘Historicism’

Teige and Dualisms: A Brief Theoretical Biography

The foregoing intellectual biography reveals an important underlying pattern: integrating the two sides of a dualism had been a consistent ambition of Teige’s since his early adulthood. Even as a teenager Teige had noted his struggle to reconcile if not harmonize ‘the unending conflict between law, tradition, and the boundaries of *métier* on one side, and fantasy, invention, and unbounded daring towards revolution on the other — this “longue querelle de la tradition et d’invention, de l’ordre et d’aventure”’.¹ Dualist thought is, to be sure, hardly uncommon, and was a prominent feature among other Czech writers and thinkers close to Teige as well: Nezval, for example, encapsulated the Poetism–Constructivism dualism in the very title of his poetic-programmatic text ‘Papoušek na motocyklu’ [Parrot on a Motorcycle] (1924).² But in Teige’s case the ‘question of dualism’ assumes singular importance. The specific nature of Teige’s dualism, as we have seen, went through several major transformations over his mature career. Constructivism and Poetism, the double credo that became the most recognizable rallying cry of Devětsil in the 1920s, is the most famous of these (and provides the focus of Part II of this book). His Functionalism–Surrealism dualism in the 1930s (the focus of Part III) represents a significant transformation and intensification of his dualist logic: abandoning an explicitly ‘dual programme’ such as he had espoused in the 1920s, Teige presupposed the equivalence of Functionalism and Surrealism as entranceways to what he came to call ‘*Ars Una*’ and a unified aesthetic drive — his most radical and ambitious

1 Karel Teige, *Deníky, 1912–1925*, ed. by Jan Wiendl and Tereza Sudzinová (Prague: Akropolis, 2022), p. 531 (diary entry from 20 August 1919). The quotation is from Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (1918).

2 Vítězslav Nezval, ‘Papoušek na motocyklu’, in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 566–70. Teige’s original typographic design for the poem highlighted the juxtaposition by printing the text in two columns of loosely corresponding statements; see Vítězslav Nezval, *Panomima* (Prague: Ústřední studentské knihkupectví a nakladatelství, 1924), pp. 30–32. Rajendra Chitnis has examined the work of Vladislav Vančura, the first chairperson of Devětsil and one of the most significant Czech prose authors of the interwar period, through the trope of dualisms, and Oleg Sus has incisively examined the dualisms underlying the work of Bedřich Václavěk, who was the main theoretician in the Brno branch of Devětsil. See, respectively, Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde* (Prague: Karolinum, 2007); and Oleg Sus, ‘Estetické antinomie v české levé avantgardě’, in idem, *Estetické problémy pod napětím: Meziválečná avantgarda, surrealismus, levice* (Prague: Jůza and Jůzová, 1992), pp. 12–24.

formulation of medial holism. Accounting for his shifting yet persistent engagement with dualisms without falling back on a reductive declaration that they represent merely contradictions or inconsistencies is the main challenge Teige's intellectual career presents to the interpreter.

The temptation is to seek some underlying dynamic, a 'master dualism' as it were, determining the particular programmatic shifts Teige went through over his career. The tensions noted in the Introduction as underlying Benjamin's epigram about Breton and Le Corbusier — tensions between freedom and discipline, between imagination and analysis, and between exploration of the irrational and strict adherence to rationality — would all be candidates for such a deeper 'master dualism'. The chapters that follow will evoke several further candidates as well: Teige's embrace of the early twentieth-century Linguistic Turn simultaneously with a Pictorial Turn (*Intermezzo*); his commitment to an aesthetics both of 'purification' and of 'unification' (Chapter Five); his comparison of realism and surrealism (Chapter Six); and throughout all these chapters his equation of a critique of *representation* (focused on the tension between form and content, which is common to his thinking on both literary and visual artefacts) with a critique of *ornamentation* (focused on the tension between structure and ornament rooted in his architectural theory). Yet how to choose from amongst these? Indeed, how to avoid expanding the list to encompass further broad oppositions such as subjectivity and objectivity, art and material reality, or individualism and collectivism?

The situation is in fact even more complicated, and the dualisms even more intractable. For it is difficult not to hear in Teige's dualisms the echoes of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century aesthetic dichotomies often portrayed as foundational in modern aesthetic thought. For example, Teige appears to waver between a Kantian understanding of beauty as independent of any concept and a Hegelian understanding of beauty as harmony between reality and idea; or, put differently, between the Kantian conception of the *autonomy* of form from meaning and the Hegelian conception of their radical *integration*.³ While Teige would never have invoked the term 'beauty' as such (one of the central points of his polemic with Le Corbusier was over the latter's appeal to architectural beauty) he most certainly does work with a comparable sense of aesthetic power, which he came to call *poesie*. As we shall see in coming chapters, his attitude towards the autonomy of such aesthetic power fluctuates wildly: Teige wished both to preserve a commitment to the 'pure' or 'liberated' aesthetic experience, unfiltered through dogmatic or tendentious demands for art to convey a 'message', and to understand the aesthetic as inseparable from function, and as a means of cognition of the modern world, of responding

3 Thus what Kant regards (in section 16 of the *Critique of Judgment*) as the most proper object of a judgment of taste, the 'free beauty' that presupposes no concept, has no intrinsic meaning, and represents nothing, is dismissed by Hegel at the outset of his *Aesthetics* as 'not free, but servile' and merely 'ornamental' (Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. by Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 9). Peter V. Zima has used this 'Kantian-Hegelian' opposition as to whether art is autonomous or heteronomous (i.e., subordinate to and integrated with concepts) as a fundamental axis through which to view the development of modern literary aesthetics as a whole; see his *Literarische Ästhetik: Methoden und Modelle der Literaturwissenschaft*, 3rd edn (Tübingen: Francke, 2020).

to the realities that surround us, and of desecrating the true identity of the present (all implicit in the Functionalist 'listening' to material reality touched upon in the previous chapter). Also striking is the neatness with which Teige's Constructivism–Poetism dualism maps onto another foundational aesthetic precedent, the typology of human drives Schiller presented in his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1795). Constructivism echoes the struggle between recalcitrant materiality and the human drive to impose form on the world that Schiller describes as a state of tension between sense- and form-drives (*sinnlicher Trieb* and *Formtrieb*). Poetism, with its celebration of ludic spontaneity so often mocked by Teige's critics as self-indulgence or foolishness, is a humble echo of the grand reconciliation Schiller posited through his famous play-drive (*Spieltrieb*).⁴

Given the range and historical depth of these possibilities for a 'master dualism', the real difficulty here is not to choose from amongst them but rather to admit that they are all valid in different ways. Much depends on the angle from which one observes: Teige's dualisms shimmer and change shape in the light of these variegated dichotomies that have accompanied modern aesthetic thought since at least the late eighteenth century. If the dualisms admit of so many different formulations then the challenge is not to reduce them artificially to a single one but rather to focus on the mode of relation at work here: on the process of *integration* itself, rather than any specific dualism one might identify as fundamental. What precisely is at work in this 'need for an integral harmonization, towards which Teige always had an irresistible inclination'?⁵

One might well reach for the term 'dialectics' and be done with it. Dialectics offers an attractive explanation for Teige's compulsive focus on the integration of dualist formulations. Teige's deep commitment to Marxist thinking, whatever that meant for him precisely, might justify recourse to this notion, though in the 1920s at least Teige rarely used the term dialectics in reference to his dualisms. (In the 1930s he began to invoke the term 'dialectical materialism' more frequently.)⁶ Dialectics, however, easily becomes an excuse for not engaging with the most complex and revealing aspects of his theoretical activity. A defensive appeal to dialectics, in fact, can shut down productive analysis of Teige's thought as quickly as can a reductive fixation on his contradictions. For Teige's thinking most certainly involved logical paradoxes and rhetorical contradictions that cannot be well accounted for simply as dialectics, and precisely those paradoxes and contradictions are illuminating of ambitions shared widely across the European avant-garde.

The most significant such paradox is that Teige's compulsively dualist thinking is the sign of a relentlessly *holistic* impulse: not the divisions, but the drive to integrate

4 Schiller presents the tension between sense- and form-drive in the twelfth letter, and the harmony introduced by the play-drive in the thirteenth letter.

5 Vratislav Effenberger, 'Karel Teige', in *Realita a poesie: K vývojové dialektice moderního umění* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1969), 187–222 (p. 193).

6 On the variegated (and sometimes vague) 'discourse on dialectical synthesis' that enjoyed increasing vogue among members of both the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group and the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1930s, see Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), pp. 173–77.

those divisions into a whole, is what matters most. Recognizing this drive, what Jan Wiendl has called the 'will to the integral', has fundamental importance for understanding what 'avant-gardism' meant for Teige.⁷ Teige presented himself, and his contemporaries saw him, as unflinchingly radical in his commitment to avant-gardist practices that aimed at breaking down traditional holistic conceptions of the unified aesthetic object; that aimed at the disintegration of realist mimetic representation, the fragmentation of narrative literary construction, and the rejection of harmonized architectural composition. Yet, paradoxically, Teige's radical insistence on fragmentation and discontinuity served a fundamentally totalizing vision.

Holistic thought earned a very bad reputation over the twentieth century. The philosophical ideal of 'totality' came to appear tainted by a not-so-secret affinity with totalitarianism, whereby totality came to imply 'false totality', handmaiden to nationalist or historical mythologizing that fed authoritarian regimes and the catastrophes of two world wars.⁸ Thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School have exerted particular influence on such claims, supplying formulations that have by now become practically truisms. Benjamin's widely quoted epigram states: '*Such is the aestheticization of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art*'.⁹ This neat contrast is usually understood as linking aestheticized politics with both fascism and false totality. Adorno's recondite axiom of 'the nonidentity between identity and nonidentity' expresses a radically anti-holistic logic aiming to update Hegel for the dark twentieth century.¹⁰ Lukács, by contrast, was the most significant leftist cultural theorist of the period to retain totality as a central, positive term in his thought. But he was both hostile to modernist and avant-gardist practice and can appear compromised by his accommodations to Stalinist totalitarianism.¹¹ Since the mid-1960s poststructuralist thought has consistently

7 Jan Wiendl, *Hledači krásy a řádu: Studie a skici k české literatuře 20. století* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova — Filozofická fakulta, 2014), p. 42.

8 Writing of Nazi totalitarianism the historian Michael Burleigh has written: 'While the "ism" part of the word is unappealing, the "total" part captures most strikingly the insatiable, invasive character of this form of politics, which regarded the individual, freedom, autonomous civil society and the rule of law with uncomprehending hatred'. See Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Pan Books, 2001), p. 14.

9 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996–2003), III, 101–33 (p. 122, emphasis in original). Historians have made comparable claims in their own language: 'Europe's demagogues were archly aware of the manipulative techniques they needed to generate mass faith, knowing about the impact of masses, flags, song, symbols, and colours. These men were artist-politicians'; Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, p. 9.

10 Adorno writes: 'Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself — of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept'; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 147.

11 In his insistence on the centrality of totality Lukács remained faithful to a long-standing Marxist tradition that came under increasing pressure in the interwar period; see, e.g., Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Even Lukács, however, distinguished carefully between his own use of the category of totality in a *diagnostic* sense and the problematic *normative* use of the concept.

identified holism with patterns of thought that are deluded at best and insidious at worst: this logic extends from Althusser's critique of 'expressive totality', to the early Derrida's deconstruction of conceptions of grounding and centring, to De Man's privileging of the trope of allegory over the Romantic symbol, to Deleuze and Guattari's refutation of notions of 'rootedness' and 'territorialization'.¹² In the same period an influential account by the historian Peter Gay characterized much of the ostensibly radical modernist culture of Weimar Germany as grounded in a 'hunger for wholeness' that left it open to surrender to, or seduction by, the political forces that drove in the Third Reich.¹³ Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Gottfried Benn, and F. T. Marinetti and the Italian Futurists are among the writers and artists associated with modernist or avant-garde movements who most notoriously had either a brief flirtation or an enduring romance with fascism, proving that radically modernist cultural practice offered no sure defence against radically regressive political practice. In the face of such varied and powerful critiques, suspicion regarding holistic thought is an understandable and in many respects necessary response to the appalling ways certain strains of such thought developed in the twentieth century. In this light the totalizing impulse Teige reveals might appear a regressive moment, a betrayal of truly avant-gardist radicalism and a retreat to nostalgia or longing for comforting certainties that the modern world was no longer able to supply.

But the case of Teige reveals the shortcomings of any outright equation of holistic thought with dubious nostalgia and thus totalitarian temptation. We have seen that as a matter of empirical record Teige stood firmly against not only fascist but also Stalinist totalitarianism, a stand that — especially in the case of Stalinism, which laid strong claims on his most deeply held political loyalties — required considerable integrity of character and precipitated dire personal consequences. And we have also seen that this personal response was triggered by Teige's critique of the insidious cultural, specifically architectural, developments in Nazi Germany and in the USSR (in particular the turn towards 'monumentalism'), a critique that incorporates or indeed anticipates much of the anti-holistic thinking described above. Beyond questions of personal integrity, therefore, there is an underlying theoretical point here: understanding holistic thought and the aesthetics of fragmentation as an opposition, and casting the avant-garde in alliance with the latter against the former, is simply a distortion. Teige's dualisms, and the holistic impulse they reveal, in fact may exemplify what David Roberts has called 'the totalizing impulse of the avant-garde'.¹⁴ Roberts's conception is particularly useful because it goes against

12 Milestone texts in this tradition include Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1997 [1965]); Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1967]), pp. 278–94; Paul De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983 [1969]), pp. 187–228; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975]).

13 See Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (London: Penguin, 1969), Chapter 4.

14 David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 5. Roberts directly recasts one of Bürger's most familiar claims when he writes: 'the

the grain of most discussions of the avant-garde, which emphasize its various structures of fragmentation and techniques of montage.¹⁵ Roberts, by contrast, argues that such exclusive emphasis on fragmentation, discontinuity, and openness as the underlying impulses of avant-garde aesthetics has the result that 'precisely this totalizing dimension [...] is occluded in the conventional definitions of the avant-garde'.¹⁶ This is not a question of distinguishing between different avant-gardist impulses such as 'analytic' and 'synthetic', the former focused on deformation and break with tradition and the latter on holism and reconnection with tradition, but rather of acknowledging their overlap and simultaneity.¹⁷ Few figures of the interwar period embody this paradoxical dynamic as clearly as Teige. What the case of Teige teaches us, therefore, is to understand holism and fragmentation not as distinct or opposed drives but as communicating vessels.

The question is where Teige's holistic impulse originates. Here I claim Teige allows a different answer to the question of avant-garde holism than that given in Roberts's important account. Roberts interprets the totalizing impulse of the avant-garde — which he frames within a tradition of the total work of art or *Gesamtkunstwerk* — as connected to claims about a future society: claims that may be given a more political or more aesthetic framing but that, despite being recast in secular, materialist terms, are fundamentally sacral in nature. In this way Roberts views the avant-garde as a central component in a spectrum of responses (which very much includes totalitarian aesthetics) to the loss of a self-evident, integrating public function of art following roughly upon the French Revolution. Roberts argues that 'the synthesizing, religious-redemptive, mystic or socially utopian intentions of the various [avant-garde] movements are constantly registered and just as constantly discounted,' and concludes: 'the artistic avant-garde [...] draws its purpose and meaning from working toward the advent of a new organic age' (pp. 144 and 147). As one of the 'counterimaginaries or alternative modernities' to a world perceived as lack, the avant-garde (and all other inflections of the total work of art as well) must inherently aim forward: 'it must pay tribute to modern historical consciousness by projecting its utopian or redemptive vision into speculative constructions of a once and future artwork' (p. 8). There are several ways that Teige might seem to fit neatly into this scheme. For one thing, if one understands Marxism, and thus

frontal attack on the institution of art is totalizing in intent' (p. 147). Roberts does not go as far as does Boris Groys, however, who identifies an avant-gardist impulse in Stalinist totalitarianism; see Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. by Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

15 Emphasis on montage as anti-holistic form characterizes not only Bürger's classic account (see especially Chapter 4) but also Dietrich Scheunemann's explicit critique of Bürger. Scheunemann sounds very similar to Bürger when he writes: 'Through the juxtaposition of disparate materials montage abolishes the homogenous, continuous shape of traditional art forms. Their surface is split up into heterogeneous elements, their uniformity replaced by the diversity of material fragments'; Dietrich Scheunemann, 'On Photography and Painting: Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde', in *European Avant-Garde*, ed. by Scheunemann, pp. 15–48 (p. 32).

16 Roberts, *The Total Work of Art*, p. 146.

17 The analytic/synthetic distinction has been formulated cogently by Aage Hansen-Löve, 'Zur Periodisierung der russischen Moderne: Die "dritte Avantgarde"', in *Wiener Slawistische Almanach*, 32 (1993), 207–64.

Marxist-based aesthetics such as Teige's, as a form of secularized eschatology in Karl Löwith's sense, then one easily encompasses Teige's thought — especially in its earliest phase, which one might regard as particularly revealing — within the redemptive utopian project Roberts describes.¹⁸ For another, declarations that the avant-garde reveals a historical break and opens a new historical age form a regular drumbeat in Teige's writings.

But there is one fundamental way in which Teige does not fit Roberts's scheme: Teige's 'modernolatry' shows commitment at least as much to the present as to the future.¹⁹ He does not so much criticize the present-day world as criticize the *misunderstanding* of the present-day world — though it is a misunderstanding he regards as widespread. The distinction is subtle yet crucial: it is the difference between calling for the creation of a future historical era and recognizing the true features of the present one; or, one might call it the distinction between an aesthetic and an epistemological project; or, between a redemptive and a recuperative one. Teige was of course hardly uncritical and was urgently concerned with the shortcomings of his contemporary world. But the glaring injustices and outrages he descried in capitalism and fascism were rooted, he felt, not in an inherently 'fallen' historical period but in the failure to recognize, or refusal to accept, the true nature of the present world: they were rear-guard actions based on, and in defence of, a false conception of the historical moment in which modern society found itself. So the problem was not that people needed to escape into a grand conception of the future but that they needed to embrace the true nature of the present rather than deny it; this would then *bring about* the future. The avant-garde for Teige was thus less a campaign to change the world into something fundamentally new than a project of properly understanding the present: the solutions were there to be found if one but summoned the will to seek. (Here again, one hears what I have characterized as his understanding of Functionalism as 'listening' to the material dictates of the present.) Teige is thus less focused on a sacral notion of a future community than on the faithful recognition of present reality. This presupposes a positive attitude towards what many of his contemporaries deemed frightening new developments — such a positive attitude was, after all, the underlying injunction of Poetism — and openness to what the modern world was revealing about itself.

This commitment to the present helps explain one of the most striking and significant features of Teige's thought: the extraordinary amplification he gives to his critique of 'historicism'. The immediate source of this term for him is the discourse of modern architecture and its rejection of the 'historical' building styles

18 See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

19 Antoine Compagnon regards this attitude as belonging to an earlier period of modernism: 'The first moderns were not seeking the new in a present that pointed toward the future and carried within itself the law of its own disappearance, but the present with its quality of being the present'. He contrasts this with the 'religion of the future' characterizing the avant-garde proper: 'While modernity can be identified with a passion for the present, the avant-garde presupposes a historical awareness of the future and a desire to be ahead of one's time'. Antoine Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 31–32.



FIG. 2.1. Christ Bearing the Cross (North Netherlandish, c. 1470).
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

characteristic of most of nineteenth-century Europe. But Teige uses 'historicism' widely as a term of censure well beyond the field of architecture. Historicism designated for Teige precisely the false conception of the present moment that the avant-garde worked to dismantle: historicism marked an epistemological error, a misreading of the present. Teige's use of the term echoes Nietzsche and anticipates Benjamin — a philosophical trajectory that underlies the remainder of this book. I shall also argue that Teige's critique of historicism underlies and explains his holistic impulse. For the avant-garde project to overcome the false or debased historical identities that historicism had generated and to recuperate an 'honest' historical image of the modern world meant nothing less than the recuperation of historical integrity.

Teige and 'Historicism': A Brief Philosophical Biography

Consider two images of Gothic architecture, each in its own way misplaced. The first is a north Netherlandish oil painting from the late fifteenth century showing Jesus bearing the cross as he makes his way to Calvary (Fig. 2.1). While the scene from the Passion understandably occupies the foreground and most prominent part of the canvas, the background competes powerfully for the viewer's attention. There we see a vast, walled Gothic city spread out across the horizon and into the distance, dominated by an intricate crenelated gatehouse and above all by an enormous circular tower, a piece of dream-like architecture, whose size contrasts so sharply with the tiny details of people moving about the square over which it looms that it invites viewers to leave Jesus to his sufferings and to enter and explore in their



FIG. 2.2. Vienna Town Hall (arch. Friedrich von Schmidt, 1883)

imagination this fantastical city-scape. The city, of course, represents Jerusalem — though this is the 'Heavenly Jerusalem' of the Book of Revelation, not the historical Jerusalem of the scene being depicted. Not only has the anonymous painter made no attempt to depict Jerusalem as it might have looked in Jesus's lifetime, but the ancient scene has been used to present a fantastic set-piece idealizing and glorifying the architectural splendours of the late fifteenth century, the present-day of both painter and intended viewer. The second image shows the magnificent modern town hall constructed between 1872 and 1883 as part of the *Ringstrasse* [Ring Road] development in Vienna (Fig. 2.2). Also representing a fantasy of Gothic architectural possibilities, this late nineteenth-century building would not look terribly out of place sitting in the background of the late fifteenth-century painting of Jesus bearing the cross. (Indeed, the architect of the town hall, Friedrich von Schmidt, had even chosen a late Flemish Gothic idiom for his Viennese building.) Yet the imposing scale of Vienna's Neogothic town hall relies on modern building materials and construction techniques, and the overall structure departs significantly from medieval practice.²⁰

Neither of these examples is unique: medieval depictions of the Passion routinely incorporate Gothic architectural features, and Neogothic was a common style for monumental public buildings in the nineteenth century. The point here is that these two misplaced Gothics represent quite distinct phenomena. 'Gothic Jerusalem' brings the past into the present: strongly modernizing in the imposition of its contemporary forms onto a distant past, it is decidedly pre-modern in the absence of historical consciousness, the presentism, it betrays. 'Neogothic Vienna', by contrast, embeds the present in the past: strongly modern in the precise, one might say scientific, historical awareness it displays, it seems anti-modern in the way it holds to an architectural idiom from an earlier time.

The latter of these two examples can serve as an emblem of the 'historicism' initially at issue here: it is a feature of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture that, from at least the Futurist association of museums with graveyards and the call to abandon 'futile veneration for the past', most avant-gardists derided as cultural decrepitude, and as being derivative of the past rather than determining a new future.²¹ In no other discipline was the critique of this historicism so central to the emergence of twentieth-century modernist practice as in architecture.²² The central ideology driving the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century emergence of modern architecture entailed the following beliefs: that the nineteenth century had failed to produce an architecture characteristic of its own true identity and

20 As Anthony Alofsin writes: 'The Rathaus [Vienna Town Hall] presented a dichotomy between the historical language on one hand and its modern functional plan and the latest technology on the other'; Anthony Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak: Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and its Aftermath, 1867–1933* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 24.

21 F. T. Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', trans. by Doug Thompson, in *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, ed. by Alex Danchev (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2011), pp. 1–8 (p. 6).

22 See, e.g., Mitchell Schwarzer, *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

had instead fallen back upon imitation of the architectural forms of previous ages; that such imitation constituted cultural weakness and a form of dishonesty about the present; that this weakness dissolved into chaotic eclecticism, or co-existence of and competition between architectural styles such as Neoclassical, Neogothic, Neorenaissance, Neobaroque, and so forth; that the profusion of these eclectic style-systems reduced those historical architectural idioms to superficial decorative gestures or mere façades covering over modern structures; and that the only way out of this cultural dead end was through a rejection of historical traditions, commonly amplified into a call for the rejection of history as such, through the 'honest' embrace of contemporary engineering techniques and modern construction materials (iron, steel, glass).²³ The architect Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879), one of the foremost restorers of Gothic monuments of the nineteenth century (among other projects he restored Notre-Dame de Paris, the basilica at Saint Denis, and the walls of Carcassonne), described in 1860 the architecture of his contemporaries as a 'grotesque medley of styles, fashions, epochs' and derided '[...] that confusion of styles, methods, and forms which renders most of our modern edifices incomprehensible and repulsive.' With a note of exasperation Viollet-le-Duc asked: 'Is the nineteenth century destined to close without possessing an architecture of its own? Will this age, which is so fertile in discoveries, and which displays an energetic vitality, transmit to posterity only imitations or hybrid works, without character, and which it is impossible to class?'²⁴ Forty years later, in 1902, the architectural critic, diplomat and civil servant Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927), who would later become a co-founder of the *Werkbund*, claimed that future historians would 'deem the superficial repetition of all past styles as the essential characteristic' of nineteenth-century architecture, and he elaborated upon that claim as follows:

[A]rchitecture and the applied arts were content to glean — with eager hands — the rich harvest so readily supplied from the formal treasury of old art. Such a situation, however, necessarily yielded a certain dissatisfaction; a time had to come when one tired of the uniform, predigested fare and longed for a change. Thus it followed quite of itself that one quickly turned to later periods of art as soon as one became satiated with the earlier one. Like a hungry herd, architects and artisans in the last two decades grazed over all periods of artistic development subsequent to the German Renaissance for their models. A stylistic battle [*unwürdiges Stiltreiben*] began, in which the Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Zopf, and Empire were slaughtered indifferently and, after a short period of blood sucking, were cast in the corner. What could then be more

23 On this discourse around historicist eclecticism, architectural style and historical identity, see Chapter One, n. 61, as well as e.g. Věra Laštovičková, 'Style and Identity: The Theoretical Foundations of Historicism in 19th-Century Architecture', in *Admired as Well as Overlooked Beauty*, ed. by Jan Galeta and Zuzana Ragulová (Brno: MUNI and Barrister & Principal, 2015), pp. 221–30; Deborah Ascher Barnstone, 'Style Debates in Early 20th-Century German Architectural Discourse', *Architectural Histories*, 6.1 (2018), article 17 [online journal]; and Martin Bressani, 'The Performative Character of Style', *Architectural Histories*, 6.1 (2018), article 15 [online journal].

24 Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Lectures on Architecture*, trans. by Benjamin Bucknall (New York: Dover, 1987), pp. 448, 455, and 446.

logical than that we would shortly find ourselves confronted by nothingness
[*dem Nichts*]?

Muthesius's conclusory judgment of nineteenth-century culture is scarcely less withering than Marinetti's Futurist tirade seven years later: 'Thus the feature of the entire century is artistic decline and artistic muddle in every guise — the condition of artistic chaos the most striking image'.²⁵ One finds comparable convictions expressed from Adolf Loos to the Werkbund, from the Bauhaus to proponents of the International Style.

Many of the deeper objections levelled against historicist eclecticism emerged from pragmatic cultural-political debates of the time. One of the most prominent of these related to the coherence of the urban fabric. Different types of public building were often built in particular historical styles due to a perceived appropriateness of historical reference. In Carl Schorske's words:

In Austria as elsewhere, the triumphant middle class was assertive in its independence of the past in law and science. But whenever it strove to express its values in architecture, it retreated into history. As [*Ringstrasse* architect Ludwig von] Förster had observed early in his career (1836) [...] 'the genius of the nineteenth century is unable to proceed on its own road.... The century has no decisive color.' Hence it expressed itself in the visual idiom of the past, borrowing that style whose historical associations were most appropriate to the representational purpose of a given building.²⁶

Thus in Vienna's major urban renewal project in the 1860s–1880s, in the development of the *Ringstrasse* with its range of monumental public buildings, the parliament was Neoclassical as a reference to the roots of democracy in Ancient Greece, the town hall was Neogothic as a reference to the medieval origins of Vienna's independent urban governance, the university was Neorenaissance as a reference to the secular Humanist origins of modern scholarship, and the opera was Neobaroque as a reference to the period of that artform's original florescence.²⁷

Critics, however, claimed that quite aside from whatever objections one might level against the individual buildings, the overall assemblage of such disparate styles produced a chaotic, incoherent, and confusing urban landscape (see Fig. 2.3). In 1847, for example, the German architect Heinrich Hübsch (1795–1863) wrote:

Of course, it is possible — *per força* — to foist any style whatsoever onto any building but only by doing one of two things. Either the style is modified to

25 Hermann Muthesius, *Style-Architecture and Building-Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and its Present Condition*, trans. by Stanford Anderson (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), pp. 69–70. German original: *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst: Wandlungen der Architektur im XIX. Jahrhundert und ihr heutiger Standpunkt* (Mühlheim-Ruhr: K. Schimmelpfeng, 1902), pp. 36–37. On Muthesius and the Werkbund, see Joan Campbell, *The German Werkbund: The Politics of Reform in the Applied Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 12–16; and Banham, *Theory and Design*, Chapter 5.

26 Carl Schorske, 'The Ringstrasse and the Birth of Modern Urbanism', in Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981), p. 36. See also Ákos Moravánszky, *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867–1918* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), Chapter 2.

27 See *ibid.*, pp. 36–43.



FIG. 2.3. The *Ringstrasse* in Vienna

fit the present, just as in the theatre an antiquated dress is adjusted to fit the fashion of the day: this is called the free treatment of style. Or by here and there stretching and compressing the essential structural and spatial forms of the building on a procrustean bed: this operation when carried out without too severely mutilating the functions in question is called architectural skill. Thus, with a lack of character that makes the age of the periwigs — which at least kept to one style — look like an epoch of high achievement, the Gothic style is chosen today for a church, the Greek style tomorrow for a theatre, the Byzantine style for a palace, or possibly the other way around, so that we might just as well have drawn lots.²⁸

Hübsch's objection to a particular way of organizing urban space takes on more philosophically resonant tones, striking several notes here that would long echo in critiques of architectural historicism. First is the accusation of its fundamentally theatrical nature: in place of a 'true identity' it constituted mere costume drama or cheap theatre, borrowing and exchanging superficially conceived identities at will.

28 Heinrich Hübsch, 'The Differing Views of Architectural Style in Relation to the Present Time', in Heinrich Hübsch et al., *In What Style Should We Build? The German Debate on Architectural Style*, ed. and trans. by Wolfgang Herrmann (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992), pp. 169–77 (p. 170). Originally in Heinrich Hübsch, *Die Architektur und ihr Verhältniß zur heutigen Malerei und Skulptur* (Stuttgart and Tübingen: J. G. Cotta, 1847), pp. 184–97.

Second is his assertion of the randomness of the style choices. Hübsch mocks the alleged symbolic appropriateness of particular historical styles to particular building types, pointing out that these are not self-evident and can in fact be switched at will. Both arguments incorporate the idea that the outer form of the building, the historical garb in which it is dressed, bears no necessary or organic connection to the inner meaning or function of the building. This rhetoric of an 'inner/outer split' would evolve into the proto- and then fully modernist argument that historicist architecture was marked by a dichotomy or rupture between the building's outer 'shell' (conforming to one or another of the historical stylistic systems) and its inner structure (performing constructive functions), and that it was necessary to peel off, so to speak, that outer shell so as to reveal the truth of the inner structure.²⁹ Hübsch then added a further complaint: 'How numbed and confused must the visual sense become when the formal extremes of two thousand years — the Gothic and Greek styles — are presented in close proximity!' Hübsch claims that the physical proximity of temporally disparate architectural styles causes distraction and sensory overload. In this way stylistic eclecticism reflects something specific to what he calls these 'hurried and fragmented times': historical eclecticism is thus peculiarly consonant with the increasingly decentring, disruptive, and mentally exhausting effects of modern urban life.³⁰

A further common cultural-political objection against architectural historicism saw it linked indissolubly with nationalism — a charge that became particularly freighted for the emerging left-wing avant-garde in the early twentieth century. Just as the assignment of a particular historical style to public buildings of a particular function relied on the presumed appropriateness of the symbolic resonance carried by that historical style, so many debates about architectural historicism centred on the 'national appropriateness' of various styles: the degree to which a particular historical style expressed most truthfully the historical identity of the nation.³¹ Thus while early discussions — such as Hübsch's formulation above — on architectural styles presented a choice between Classical or Gothic, both French and German architects could and did come to claim Gothic as an inherently 'French' or 'German' building style, shifting the question of chronology to one of geography, and the question of historical appropriateness to national appropriateness.

Such debates became particularly pointed in Prague (and indeed throughout Bohemia and Moravia) in the later years of the Habsburg monarchy, as a rising Czech-speaking bourgeoisie came to control first the Prague municipal council (1861) and then the regional parliament (1883) and, thus empowered to make

29 See Werner Oechslin, 'The Evolutionary Way to Modern Architecture: The Paradigm of *Stilhülle und Kern*', in *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, ed. by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993), pp. 363–410. Also recall Alofsin's reference to the 'dichotomy between the historical language on one hand and [the] modern functional plan and the latest technology on the other' in the Vienna town hall (note 20).

30 Hübsch, 'The Differing Views of Architectural Style', p. 171. Hübsch's formulation brings to mind Simmel's famous analysis of 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903).

31 See Schwarzer, *German Architectural Theory*, pp. 54–59 and Chapter 3.

increasingly important decisions about public works, attempted to downplay the 'German' aspects of the municipal infrastructure and to support ever more visibly the 'Czech' character of the city.³² Mid-nineteenth century plans to complete the St Vitus cathedral in Prague, for example, were in many ways in line with the pious completion of Gothic cathedrals elsewhere in Europe (such as Cologne Cathedral, completed in 1880), which was one of the most visible consequences of Gothic Revival and Neogothic enthusiasm. Yet in Prague this initiative came to assume a prominent role in the national aspirations of the Czechs in the later Habsburg period, as Habsburg authorities — who regarded the cathedral with its opulent fourteenth-century chapel housing the remains of the Czech 'national saint', St Wenceslaus, as too powerful a symbol of Czech statehood — had in the 1850s interfered with plans to complete the cathedral.³³ (The cathedral was completed only in 1929, more than ten years after the foundation of Czechoslovakia.) From 1860, planning and construction of the Czech National Theatre became another major patriotic project in the Czech lands: public donations were collected to fund construction, and the long drawn-out process — the final building was not completed until 1883, when it opened with the premier of Bedřich Smetana's opera *Libuše*, based on medieval Czech myths about the founding of the Bohemian nation — even introduced a novel greeting to the Czech language: 'Na Zdar!' [To success!].³⁴ The National Theatre was constructed in a northern Italian Neorenaissance style that, although not specifically Czech, was understood as expressing the nineteenth-century revival or renaissance of Czech culture and society (see Fig. 2.4).³⁵ By the 1880s the situation had progressed to the point where a specifically 'Czech Neorenaissance' style had emerged, allegedly reflecting a period of flowering of Czech urban culture between the end of the Hussite wars and the consolidation of Habsburg power in Bohemia, and this was understood for some time as the most appropriate 'national style'.³⁶ The result of such layering was that modernists in the early twentieth century could understand their rejection of historicism not only as the espousal of the present over the past, but of cosmopolitanism and internationalism over narrow-minded regionalism and nationalism. Teige manifested this position vociferously.

But the question of historicism was not simply an architectural problem. The

32 See Marta Filipová, *Modernity, History, and Politics in Czech Art* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–22; and Rostislav Švácha, *The Architecture of New Prague, 1895–1945*, trans. by Alexandra Büchler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 18–19.

33 See Jindřich Vybíral, 'Katedrála jako národní svatyňe', in Jindřich Vybíral, *Česká architektura na prahu moderné doby: Devatenáct esejí o devatenáctém století* (Prague: Argo, 2002), pp. 61–69; and Jaroslava Staňková, Jiří Štursa, and Svatopluk Voděra, *Pražská architektura: Významné stavby jedenácti století* (Prague: n. pub., 1991), pp. 215–17.

34 The greeting continues to be used today, though the patriotic colouring is often forgotten. It is also worth noting that to this day the National Theatre opens each season with a performance of *Libuše*.

35 See Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak*, pp. 30–43.

36 See Moravánszky, *Competing Visions*, p. 218; Jindřich Vybíral, 'Hledání národního stylu', in Vybíral, *Česká architektura na prahu moderné doby*, pp. 141–58; and Švácha, *The Architecture of New Prague*, p. 28. The historian and novelist Zikmund Winter in 1913 portrayed this period as the 'golden age of Czech towns'; see Zikmund Winter, *Zlatá doba měst českých* (Prague: Odeon, 1991).



FIG. 2.4. The Czech National Theatre
(Ignác Vojtěch Ullmann, Josef Zítek, and Josef Schulz, 1866–83).
Prague City Archives

philosophical resonances were deep, and difficult or impossible to separate from how one understood the origin of 'the modern era'. Twentieth-century modernists, in particular those who self-identified as avant-gardists, generally subscribed to some version of the *tabula rasa* model: the linkage of the modern era with notions of rupture, refoundation, renewal, the new *tout court*, and thus hostility to and autonomy from traditions and the past as such.³⁷ This view equates the modern era with a 'rejection of history'. But another model is available as well, most famously associated with Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, which understands the particularity of the modern era as residing in its reflexive self-awareness, its historical consciousness, its ability to identify and objectify its own historical positioning. (It is precisely the lack of such historical consciousness that allows the depiction of the Passion discussed above to ignore a millennium and a half and represent first-century Jerusalem as a fifteenth-century city.) This model also understands the modern era as a sort of new beginning, as it implies that earlier eras lacked meaningful awareness of their own historical conditioning; but unlike the *tabula rasa* model, history here is not rejected but fully embraced. Reinhart Koselleck identifies this development with the perception of the present moment as a discrete unit that is cut off from preceding epochs, and he locates the decisive moment in the period around the French Revolution, when the distinction between the modern age (*neue Zeit*) and immediate contemporaneity (*die neueste Zeit*) became more widely perceived. He writes: 'The differentiation of *neue* from *neueste Zeit* became the object of increasing reflection on the nature of historical time. Here the rapid manner in which the concept became accepted is an indicator of an acceleration in the rate of change of historical experience and the enhancement of a conscious working-over [*bewußtseinsmässigen Verarbeitung*] of the nature of time'.³⁸ As time itself becomes ever more prominent as a medium in itself, history becomes ever more an object one stands apart from, rather than within. History changes from experience to object of conscious reflection.

The philosopher most immediately linked with this conception of modernity as historical 'awakening' is Hegel, for whom philosophy becomes to a large extent the history of philosophy — and he himself the 'woke' subject who comprehends the telos of that historical development. It is no coincidence that Hegel is also linked to the first strong claims that art has come to an end: 'Thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art', he writes, and that same act of historical consciousness that defines the 'reflective culture of our life today' transforms art into self-reflective *theory* of art, and spontaneous aesthetic experience into the

37 The 'prestige of the new' (Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, Chapter 1) so often emphasized in accounts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism is a direct inflection of the dynamic of self-foundation or autonomy characteristic of modernity from the seventeenth century on; see, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); and Robert B. Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

38 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 235. German original: Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 320.

scientific gaze.³⁹ In this light Viollet-le-Duc's lament that the nineteenth century seemed destined to leave no architectural legacy except imitation can be understood less as an indictment of cultural weakness and more as an acknowledgement that the consciousness of history — in this case of historical architectural styles — placed one either above or outside of that historical framework altogether. Imitation thus constitutes the only artistic 'style' possible in the historically conscious era. Yet the power that this achievement of historical consciousness seemed to convey was astonishing: not just Hegel but also Marx, in particular, bear witness to how greatly this development shaped the modern era by providing confidence that if the past were fully comprehended then the future too could be controlled and constructed. The repercussions of the displacement of an earlier absolutizing or idealist logic with the historical and genealogical logic underlying this Historical Turn were pervasive in nineteenth-century European thought. Aside from Hegel, Herder is the thinker who did the most to articulate the liberating, enlightening dynamic that resulted from understanding one's own historical positioning and thinking one's way into, and thus understanding and empathizing as much as possible with the historical positioning of others.⁴⁰ Herder's empathetic cosmopolitanism was soon complemented by what might be called a sense of historical colonialism: 'ownership' of all of history, of all cultural forms. The historian (and erstwhile friend of Nietzsche) Jacob Burckhardt might initially sound like Viollet-le-Duc when he observes around 1870 that 'the fate of modern poetry as a whole is the consciousness, born of the history of literature, of its relationship to the poetry of all times and peoples. On that background, it appears as an imitation or an echo'; yet on the whole Burckhardt is reassured by 'the intellectual possession of the whole world, past and present', that such broad cultural consciousness allows.⁴¹

But historical consciousness turned surprisingly quickly into historical self-consciousness: a sense of weakness and immobility, a sense that historical consciousness was not a gift but a burden.⁴² In the realm of art and aesthetics this

39 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. by Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 12. Hegel does not mourn the end of art because he sees it as necessary for the triumph of science (as he understood it): 'In all these respects art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past. Herein it has further lost for us its genuine truth and life, and rather is transferred into our *ideas* than asserts its former necessity, or assumes its former place, in reality. [...] Therefore the *science* of art is a much more pressing need in our day than in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish a full satisfaction. Art invites us to consideration of it by means of thought, not to the end of stimulating art production, but in order to ascertain scientifically what art is'; *ibid.*, p. 13. As Robert Pippin has pointed out, however, Hegel's claim that 'something can, in some historical period, "pose" as art and yet not be art, that it can be produced and viewed as art, be treated as art by the relevant authorities, and yet still not be art' is inconsistent with the historicist standpoint with which Hegel began. Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 44.

40 Hegel stands greatly in Herder's debt: 'Hegel's philosophy turns out to be an elaborate systematic extension of Herderian ideas (far greater than is generally realized)'; Michael N. Forster, 'Introduction', in Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. vii–xxxv (p. vii).

41 Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, trans. by M. D. Hottinger (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979), p. 110 and 105.

42 See, e.g., Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, trans. by Eric Matthews

engendered that perception of weakness or decrepitude, of being false or mere pretenders, that inspired so much self-flagellation by nineteenth-century artists and thinkers and which we have encountered above in those critiques of architectural historicism. The sense of pride gave way to a sense of embarrassment; the sense of control to a sense of helplessness. By the later part of the nineteenth century the sort of complaints we have seen in relation to historicist architecture were being keenly felt in many fields of culture, including philosophy itself, where the diagnosis of a 'crisis of historicism' might seem an ironic ratcheting-up of self-reflection and observation.⁴³ What for Hegel had been an epochal achievement, the scientific gaze on art ('consideration of it by means of thought', see note 39), was for a figure like the arbiter of the arts during the Napoleonic era, Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849), a merely museal gaze, demonstrating that the present had lost its immanent connection with the past, and that art displaced from its 'natural' spaces (cathedrals, palaces, and comparable 'original' sites) into the museum also lost experiential value for the viewer. Quatremère de Quincy anticipated a viewpoint that only grew in strength over the century: that the rise of the museum confirmed the death of art as a source of experience and the victory of a merely formal appreciation of the variety of art through history.⁴⁴ Art was reduced to an art catalogue, and history to the contents of an encyclopaedia. No thinker did more to articulate this negative sense of History — the manner in which History becomes objectified compels the capital letter — as an indigestible and unnourishing mass of facts than did Nietzsche.⁴⁵ The second of his *Untimely Meditations*, ominously titled 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life' (1874), is effectively an extended manifesto against historicism. It is indicative of a logic

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 34–40. Indeed the first inklings of this shift are discernible at the very time of the Historical Turn itself in Schiller's distinction between 'naïve' and 'sentimental' poetry.

43 Charles Bambach writes of this crisis that 'the sheer restoration of philosophical ideas from the past — in the form of Neo-Kantianism, Neo-Hegelianism, Neo-Thomism, Neo-Aristotelianism, Neo-Fichteanism, and other resurrected movements — did not encourage innovative or energetic solutions to philosophy's perceived identity crisis. In this sense, the professional philosopher's fondness for reviving antiquated philosophical systems during the nineteenth century might best be compared to the flourishing of historicist art forms during the same period. Just as the revival of classical, Gothic, baroque, and mannerist styles confirmed a generation's inability to fashion its own unique style, so, too, the renaissance of various philosophical systems in the late nineteenth century revealed the shortcomings of post-Hegelian philosophy in Germany'; Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 25.

44 Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 17–22 on death of art as experience; and pp. 24–26 on the contrast with Hegel's linkage of the museal gaze with the creation of a 'pantheon' of 'Spirit that itself is conscious of itself as Spirit' in section 753 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 456. But see also Maleuvre's important caveat against an overly triumphalist reading of Hegel on museification of art (p. 38).

45 On the influence of Nietzsche's diagnosis of 'the historical disease', see e.g. Tilmann Buddensieg, 'Architecture as Empty Form: Nietzsche and the Art of Building', in *Nietzsche and 'An Architecture of Our Minds'*, ed. by Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wohlfarth (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), pp. 259–84 (pp. 260–61).

that anticipated and became as widespread in the twentieth-century avant-garde as Herder's encomium to History had been for most of the nineteenth century.⁴⁶

This scheme of a late eighteenth-century 'turn to History' followed by a late nineteenth-century 'turn away from History', however, is too neat. In fact there are important continuities in how Herder and Nietzsche made their cases, even if those cases argued from opposite ends. Those continuities create complexities that have fundamental significance for understanding how the twentieth-century avant-garde understood its relation to History — and, as we shall see in further chapters, not only does Teige illustrate these complexities in a stark fashion, but they help illuminate many points that can appear obscure or contradictory in some of Benjamin's later work as well. Given how firmly the twentieth-century avant-garde held to its credo of denigrating the historical as such, it is imperative to examine more closely how History changed from liberating force to stultifying burden — how History became 'historicism'.

The Greenhouse Effect: From History to 'Historicism'

In his 1874 anti-historicist manifesto, the young Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: 'To be sure, we need history; but our need for it is different from that of the pampered idler in the garden of knowledge'.⁴⁷ For Nietzsche, the 'scientific' collection of history into museums and encyclopaedias entailed a form of decadence, and the scientist became a 'curious tourist' or 'idler who, longing for diversion or excitement, saunters about as though among the painted treasures amassed in a gallery' (*HL*, p. 96, translation modified; *NN*, p. 258). The implied equivalence in Nietzsche's images of the 'garden of history' and a crowded painting gallery is telling, for it connects his polemic with the questions regarding historicist aesthetics and the museal gaze discussed above. Nearly half a century after Nietzsche, Le Corbusier would exhort modern architects to 'challenge the past' by rejecting the canons of historical eclecticism as 'hot-houses where blue hortensias and green chrysanthemums are forced, and where unclean orchids are cultivated'.⁴⁸ Le Corbusier's hot-houses convey dissipated cultivation, debilitating overabundance, just as much as does

46 Paul de Man presented Nietzsche's text as a paradigmatic expression of what happens 'when a genuine impulse toward modernity collides with the demands of a historical consciousness'; Paul de Man, 'Literary History and Literary Modernity', in de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, pp. 142–65 (p. 145). One might also read it as illustrating the sharp incompatibility between the 'tabula rasa' and 'historical consciousness' models of modernity.

47 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. by Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 83–167 (p. 85) (hereafter cited in the text as '*HL*'). German original: *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II: 'Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben'*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, (Munich: DTV; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), I, 243–334 (p. 245) (hereafter cited in the text as '*NN*'). Nietzsche does not directly use the term 'historicism' in *HL*, though Karl Heusi has described it as the book 'in which one most of all senses it [i.e., the term 'historicism']'; Karl Heussi, *Die Krisis des Historismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932), p. 2.

48 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. by Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), pp. 7 and 16.

Nietzsche's garden. Overturning long-established associations of the garden with pastoral or idealized states, Nietzsche's image of history as an overgrown garden fit only for decadent indulgence thus stands at the inception of a powerful rhetorical tradition for expressing the modernist hostility to the past as such.

Nietzsche's image expresses his claim that history has become inimical to what he sets up as the decisive term in his essay: life — an avant-garde watchword *par excellence*. For Nietzsche, life or 'life force' (*Lebenskraft*) is a force for ceaseless creation of new identities, reinvention, exploration, and innovation: a set of values whose proximity to central ideals of the twentieth-century avant-garde is obvious. Nietzsche contrasts these values with the passivity of historicist culture, where that idler merely meanders through the garden overgrown with blossoms representing the achievements of past eras, either sniffing them appreciatively or snipping them to be catalogued in a herbarium. The sheer abundance, the overgrowth, the excess of historical knowledge prohibits the creation of new identities. Nietzsche writes of the proper relation to history thus:

that this is the natural relation of an age, a culture, or a people to history — called forth by hunger, regulated by the degree of need, kept within bounds by an inherent shaping power; that knowledge of the past is at all times desirable only insofar as it serves the future and the present — not insofar as it weakens the present or uproots a future that is full of life [...] Today life no longer rules alone and constrains our knowledge of the past: instead, all the boundary markers have been torn down and everything that once was is now collapsing upon the human being. As far back into the past as the process of becoming extends, as far back as infinity, all perspectives have shifted. No past generation ever witnessed such an unsurveyable spectacle of the sort now being staged by the science of universal becoming, by history. (*HL*, pp. 108–09; *NN*, pp. 271–72)

In addition to decadence then historicism was a form of gluttony, the greedy consumption of what Nietzsche strikingly called 'indigestible stones of knowledge'. The result, not surprisingly, was not nourishment but torpor: 'Knowledge consumed in excess [*Uebermaasse*] of hunger — indeed, even contrary to one's need — now no longer is effective as a shaping impulse directed outward, but instead remains hidden in a chaotic inner world that every modern human being, with peculiar pride, designates his own characteristic "inwardness"' (*HL*, pp. 109–10; *NN* pp. 272–73). He concluded: 'We moderns have nothing that we have drawn from ourselves alone; we become something worthy of attention — namely, walking encyclopaedias [...] — only by stuffing and overstuffing ourselves with alien times, customs, arts, philosophies, religions and knowledge' (*HL*, pp. 110–11; *NN*, pp. 273–74). In this respect Nietzsche could well have quoted Viollet-le-Duc, who wrote:

The studios of our architects are full of instructive appliances, books, and drawings, but when called upon to design even the most unimportant edifice, though all material means are in abundance, the artist's intelligence is inert, and refuses to create anything new. His invention languishes under a surfeit of undigested data. [...] Our public buildings appear to be bodies destitute of a

soul, the relics of a lost civilization, a language incomprehensible even to those who use it.⁴⁹

Both Nietzsche and Viollet-le-Duc described historicism as a condition of being both overstuffed and undernourished, a paradoxical simultaneity of abundance and emptiness.

The life force Nietzsche set in contrast to historicism represented the 'shaping power' of a human being, a people, a culture [...]. I mean that power to develop its own singular character out of itself, to shape and assimilate [*einzuverleiben*] what is past and alien, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken forms out of itself alone' (*HL*, p. 89; *NN*, p. 251; emphasis in original). *Lebenskraft* operated by consuming raw materials and transforming them into the expression of a strong and consistent identity; it was the precondition for creative self-expression (*Äußerung*). The ultimate cultural product of this expressive vitalism would be 'style' — that style whose absence in the nineteenth century Viollet-le-Duc had lamented. Nietzsche wrote: 'The culture of a people that is the antithesis of that barbarism was once termed [...] the unity of artistic style that manifests itself throughout all the vital self-expressions [*Lebensäusserungen*] of a people' (*HL*, p. 111; *NN*, p. 274). Such a vitalist, unified style expressed a culture's power to transform the eclectic sources from which it was composed into coherent patterns and original forms that would constitute signature, recognizable features.⁵⁰

Given the vehemence of Nietzsche's critique of historicism here, it is surprising how much his arguments echo those that Herder had put forward a century earlier — arguments Herder made for the turn to History.⁵¹ For Herder had been one of the earliest and most influential philosophers to focus on the vitalist conception of *Kraft* (force or power) that Nietzsche directly invoked in his critique of historicism.⁵² Herder, however, had identified *Kraft* as the force that powered human history, an organic process he depicted through precisely the garden metaphor that Nietzsche mocked: 'one could regard the Earth as a garden, where here one and there another

49 Viollet-le-Duc, *Lectures on Architecture*, p. 446. Muthesius wrote of the architects' 'predigested fare' (see page 89); the association of historicism with digestive problems was strangely common.

50 Nietzsche's *HL* clearly constitutes a source for what Peter Sloterdijk has termed the literature of 'Epochen-Physiognomik' [physiognomy of historical epochs] during the Weimar period; see Peter Sloterdijk, 'Weltanschauungssayistik und Zeitdiagnostik', in *Literatur der Weimarer Republik, 1918–1933*, ed. by Bernhard Weyergraf (Munich: DTV, 1995), pp. 309–39. This discourse, with its frequent lapses into atavism and 'neo-mythical impulses' (p. 310), exhibited an organicist logic that often made it amenable to fascism. See also Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

51 The present section of this chapter summarizes points that I have discussed more fully in Peter Zusi, 'Towards a Genealogy of Modernism: Herder, Nietzsche, History', in *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67.4 (2006), 505–25. Readers seeking further detail and bibliography are referred to that article.

52 On Herder's conception of *Kraft*, see, e.g., Robert E. Norton, 'Herder's Concept of "Kraft" and the Psychology of Semiotic Functions', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, ed. by Wulf Koepke (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), pp. 23–31; and Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 145–48.

human national plant bloomed in its proper figure [*Bildung*] and nature'.⁵³ Herder set the organic force of history expressed by the garden metaphor against what he deemed the 'mechanical' historiography of Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Voltaire, and Robertson. Herder is often labelled a founding father of the German 'Counter-Enlightenment', but this is not precise.⁵⁴ Both his proximity and his distance from conventional Enlightenment thought is well illustrated by the following quotation: 'How many ancient fables of human monsters and deformities have already disappeared before the light of history! and where tradition still repeats remnants of these, I am fully convinced that the stronger light of inquiry will clarify them [*aufklären*] into more beautiful truths' (*Ideas*, p. 165, translation modified; *SW*, xiii, 255). This commitment to the increase of knowledge and tolerance and to the battle against prejudice and superstition clearly reveals Herder's affinities with mainstream Enlightenment thought, as does his use of the verb *aufklären* (*Aufklärung* being the German term for Enlightenment). Nevertheless, the above passage also indicates where Herder departed from that mainstream. While 'light' and 'enlightenment' were still the victors over fable and superstition, the mechanism of enlightenment had changed: where one would expect to find the 'light of reason', one finds the 'light of history' instead.

History for Herder was not simply the record of 'life force': it also provided a mode of thought that was vitalist rather than mechanical. History as a field of knowledge about unique particulars was resistant to the pseudo-precision of catalogues and the nomothetic universalism of scientific thought, thus fostering a more subtle and engaged way of seeing the world. He felt that the systematic knowledge so prized by Enlightenment thinkers had lost touch with real life. In the uniquely quirky *Sturm und Drang* prose style of his early work he wrote:

On paper how pure!, how gentle!, how beautiful and great — but hopeless in execution!, at each step amazed and staring frozen [*staunend und starrend*] before unseen obstacles and consequences. [...] One rationalizes! Dictionaries and philosophies about all of them, without understanding a single one of them with the tool in one's hand. They have one and all become abrégé raisonné of their former pedantry — abstracted spirit!, philosophy [made] out of two thoughts — the most mechanical thing in the world.⁵⁵

53 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. by T. Churchill (New York: Bergman, 1966), p. 349; translation modified (hereafter '*Ideas*'). German original: *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91), in *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1887), xiv, 84 (hereafter '*SW*'). The 'garden of history' is only one in a constellation of floral and vegetable metaphors in Herder's writings, many of which have complicated histories extending back to antiquity. See Edgar B. Schick, *Metaphorical Organicism in Herder's Early Works: A Study of the Relation of Herder's Literary Idiom to His World-View* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), and August Langen, 'Der Wortschatz des 18. Jahrhunderts', in *Deutsche Wortgeschichte*, ed. by F. Maurer and H. Rupp, 3rd edn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1959), II, 23–223 (pp. 210–12).

54 On this misrepresentation, see, e.g., Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680–1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 778.

55 Johan Gottfried Herder, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), in Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 272–358 (pp. 317–18). German original: *SW*, v, 475–594 (pp. 536–37).

In the shift from vital activity to passive observation, in the impulse to catalogue and define in dictionaries and encyclopaedias, in the abstraction that lost contact with the real world, Herder's critique of mechanical reason has much in common with Nietzsche's critique of historicism.

The particular point of continuity between Herder and Nietzsche that becomes most significant for the twentieth-century avant-garde, however, was their common criticism of a world transformed into mere superficial form. Herder describes the 'mechanical' Enlightenment relation to the past as follows: 'In Europe the *grown harvest* [*Gewächs*] of the ancient *world-centuries* was due only to be *dried* and *pressed* [...] Everything was already *invented*, *felt*, *subtly thought up* that perhaps could be thought up; here everything now got cast into *method*, into *scientific form*.'⁵⁶ Nietzsche lamented 'the precarious gulf between content [*Inhalt*] and form' produced by the modern historicizing consciousness, which broke down that 'unity of artistic style' that characterized a vital, dynamic culture (*HL*, p. 111; *NN*, p. 274). Modern German culture in particular is for Nietzsche so focused on 'inner life' (*Innerlichkeit*) and on the amassing of historical content (*Inhalt*) that its outer forms become meaningless, mere empty form that does not truly express those contents. In their respective polemics for and against History, Herder anticipates and Nietzsche echoes a notion of *formalism* that received classic formulation in Hegel and that would echo powerfully in twentieth-century aesthetic debates. Hegel mocked 'monochromatic formalism' (that 'night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black') with vicious rhetoric:

It would be hard to decide which is greater in all this, the casual ease with which everything in heaven and on earth and under the earth is coated with this broth of colour, or the conceit regarding the excellence of this universal recipe: each supports the other. What results from this method of labelling all that is in heaven and earth with the few determinations of the general schema, and pigeonholing everything in this way, is nothing less than a 'report clear as noonday' [a mocking allusion to a work by Fichte] on the universe as an organism, viz. a synoptic table like a skeleton with scraps of paper stuck all over it, or like the rows of closed and labelled boxes in a grocer's stall. It is as easy to read off as either of these; and just as all the flesh and blood has been stripped from this skeleton, and the no longer living 'essence' has been packed away in the boxes, so in the report the living essence of the matter has been stripped away or boxed up dead.⁵⁷

Nietzsche associates this formalism with a debilitating dualism, a 'schism between the inner and the outer' (*HL*, p. 115; *NN*, p. 278), and he contrasts it with the holistic mode of expression (*Äusserung*) of 'healthier' epochs: 'A people to whom we attribute a culture should in all reality be but a single, vital unity and not fall apart so miserably into inner and outer, content and form' (*HL*, p. 111; *NN*, p. 274). Historicist culture created superficial forms (*Äusserlichkeit*), not true expression of an inner identity (*Äusserung*). Those superficial forms, borrowed from past epochs, were in effect merely theatrical costumes, disguises, masks; the people whose

56 *This Too a Philosophy*, p. 339; *SW*, v, 563–64.

57 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 9 and 31 (§§16 and 51).

lives played out among such forms became merely 'actors out of timorousness' (*HL*, p. 119; *NN*, p. 283) or worse, 'walking lies' (*HL*, p. 118; *NN*, p. 281).⁵⁸ The result was what Nietzsche derided as a 'decorative culture', and he desperately sought a new, honest historical subject who would 'at some point rebel against the constant imitation — imitation of speech and imitation of learning — that he finds everywhere around him. He will then begin to grasp that culture can be for something other than the decoration of life — that is, at bottom always only mere dissimulation and disguise, for all ornaments have the purpose of concealing what they adorn' (*HL*, p. 167; *NN*, 333–34).

Now we can follow more closely the path that leads from Herder's call to History to Nietzsche's critique of historicism. Both thinkers share the vitalist ideal of life force, and both oppose that ideal to the deadening logic of formalism. But 'History' has changed from remedy to problem: for Nietzsche, History is the source of, not the antidote to, formalism. Nietzsche's bequest to the twentieth-century avant-garde is precisely this conception of 'historicism' as *History crossed with formalism*.⁵⁹ The avant-gardist 'rejection of history', therefore, should be redefined: it is not the rejection of *History* as such, but the rejection of *historicism* as formulated largely by Nietzsche. Few avant-garde thinkers demonstrate the significance of this distinction as clearly as does Teige, with his remarkable amplification of the term 'historicism'. For this conception of historicism as formalism underlies Teige's basic understanding of the avant-garde project: that it could overcome that epistemological error, that misreading of the present, that confusion of superficial form with the true historical identity of the present. Only by being carefully attuned to what the present was revealing about itself could one achieve a form of historical integrity akin to the lost 'unity of artistic style' that Nietzsche described. Here lies the fundamental impulse of Teige's holism: to overcome the formalist rift between 'inner content' and 'outer form'. While Teige's integrational drive applies in various ways to all those various dualities and dichotomies mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the most important is his drive to achieve *historical integrity* such as described by Nietzsche. As we shall see in the chapters to come, this drive underlies his use both of the vocabulary of 'structure and ornament' as well as 'content and form' and thus connects his thinking on architectural Constructivism/Functionalism with that on literary/visual representation (the Poetist and Surrealist programmes). Rather than a wilful declaration of the 'unity of opposites' or even the 'dialectics' that interpreters have commonly used to characterize Teige's various dualist programmes, therefore, Teige's thinking is united by this critique of formalism: a critique that can be traced back not only to Nietzsche's anti-historicism, but to Herder's vitalist call to History as well.

58 We saw above in Hübsch one example of the widespread rhetoric of 'theatricality' in discussions of historicist architecture. The 'mask' became an equally prominent image: see Ákos Moravánszky, 'The Aesthetics of the Mask: The Critical Reception of Wagner's *Moderne Architektur* and Architectural Theory in Central Europe', in *Otto Wagner*, ed. by Mallgrave, pp. 199–239.

59 It is important to recall that Nietzsche's polemic (on the 'utility' and 'liability' of history for life) admits that there can be also 'healthy' versions of historical consciousness; but they have been overpowered by the formalist version.

From the standpoint of the usual identification of the avant-garde with the 'rejection of history', this genealogy linking the avant-garde to Herder's 'garden of history', and to the vitalist claims encapsulated in Herder's various metaphors of organic cultivation and growth, may sound paradoxical. Yet perhaps the architects had sensed it all along. Le Corbusier rejected the nineteenth-century historicist 'hot-houses where blue hortensias and green chrysanthemums are forced, and where unclean orchids are cultivated'. But as Alfred Gotthold Meyer pointed out, and as Benjamin carefully noted: 'The origin of all present-day architecture in iron and glass is the greenhouse'.⁶⁰

60 A. G. Meyer, *Eisenbauten*, quoted from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 158.

PART II



Unity in Dualism:
The 1920s

CHAPTER 3



Tendentious Modernism: Functionalism and Mass Culture

On a star-lit evening in the spring of 1923, according to the reminiscences of Vítězslav Nezval, he and Teige ‘discovered’ Poetism as they walked through Prague surrounded by drunkards and prostitutes, while paradoxically intoxicated with the beauty of the modern world.¹ That very same spring the Czech poet Stanislav Kostka Neumann wrote: ‘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’.² It is difficult to imagine two conceptions of modern poetry and the poetic more starkly contrasting than these: on the one hand, Nezval and Teige’s ‘art of wasting time’ and ‘lyrical-sculptural excitement at the wonder of the modern world’, and on the other, Neumann’s ‘simple, clear, unabashedly tendentious verses’.³ These positions represent antipodes of left-wing European literary politics in the interwar period: poetry as either liberation or agitation — either positing liberation achieved from the capitalist order or demanding urgent agitation to overthrow the capitalist order. Yet just over a year earlier, Neumann had served as model and mentor for Teige and Devětsil, and all of them acknowledged the centrality of tendentiousness for progressive cultural activity. The tortuous career of this aesthetic ideal in the early years of Devětsil is a prominent feature of the Czech avant-garde, but also reveals significant dynamics within modernism more generally.

The category of tendentiousness sits uncomfortably within most accounts of twentieth-century European aesthetics. By resisting rather than contributing to the triumphant development of high modernism and the avant-garde, the dogmatic, didactic, and aesthetically conservative forms to which tendentiousness as an

1 Vítězslav Nezval, ‘Návěští o poetismu’ [Promulgation on Poetism], in *Čtení o Karlu Teigovi*, ed. by Jan Wiendl (Prague: Institut pro studium literatury, 2015), pp. 86–87 (p. 86). Originally in *ReD*, 1.3 (1927), 94–95.

2 Stanislav Kostka Neumann, ‘Umění v sociální revoluce’ [Art in the Social Revolution], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlačín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 455–60 (p. 457). Originally in *Proletkult*, 2 (1923), 266–68.

3 Karel Teige, ‘Poetismus’, in *Výbor*, 1, 121–28 (pp. 123), trans. by Ian Finlay; and Neumann, ‘Umění v sociální revoluce’, p. 457.

ideal generally gave rise appear as a mere sideshow to, or indeed as a rearguard action against, the most important cultural dynamics of the time. Worse yet, by 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.⁴ Yet it must be remembered that to a striking degree tendentiousness also accords with ideals widely shared within the interwar avant-garde. For tendentiousness promises to forge a link between aesthetics and political action, between art and the 'real world', thus addressing the ambition of the avant-garde to be more than a mere artistic game, to reconnect with the modern world and thereby transform life in a fundamental way. The category of tendentiousness thus appears at once persistent and peripheral, as both resisting and reinforcing the underlying ambitions of the rising twentieth-century avant-garde.

The source of this paradox lies within the constitutive logic of the avant-garde itself. The avant-gardist 'integration of art and life' presupposes a parallel between political revolt and innovation in the realm of artistic form, a parallel between the 'two avant-gardes', political and aesthetic.⁵ Tendentiousness, by contrast, denies this parallel between political and aesthetic revolutions. It holds that art can only achieve political efficacy if it is easily understood by a wide audience; the modernist and avant-garde criterion of formal experimentation, which inevitably brings complexity, unfamiliarity, and strangeness, is thus fundamentally at odds with the demand for broad comprehensibility. The argument over whether these ideals of aesthetic experimentation and political tendentiousness can be harmonized constitutes a macro-narrative of the major European avant-garde traditions. This is the unhappy consciousness of so many of the early to mid-twentieth-century movements: Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism, and Critical Theory (to name only the most familiar examples on the Left) all argued, as did Teige, for the unity of the 'two avant-gardes', for a parallel between aesthetics and politics. Yet all met the unflinching scepticism of those who, like Neumann, demanded a clear, unambiguously expressed political message from art. There appears an unbridgeable conceptual divide between those who claimed compatibility between aesthetic and political revolution and those who denied it.

But is this opposition as absolute as it seems? Was that conceptual divide truly

4 As Teige became increasingly aware over the mid- and late 1930s, here lies a main convergence point between the National Socialist attack on 'degenerate art' and the Socialist Realist rejection of 'decadent modernism'. Far too many modernists found themselves caught in totalitarian sympathies, of course, but the cultural ideologues in power rarely returned the sentiment.

5 See the Introduction, pp. 3–4. The left-wing avant-gardes of the early and mid-twentieth century confronted this 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 'aesthetics and politics' debates of this period. Arguments that Marx and Engels themselves leaned towards an aesthetic 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 the Socialist states of the mid- and late twentieth century.

unbridgeable? Here is where the micro-narrative of the Czech example, specifically Teige's development away from his early embrace of tendentiousness, becomes particularly revealing. To be sure, one might 'explain away' this surprising early development by reference to modern Czech cultural history, for the ideal of tendentiousness that Teige and Devětsil briefly shared with Neumann might appear a legacy of the early nineteenth-century Czech National Revival (*Národní obrození*) and the predisposition to judge cultural phenomena in terms of their efficacy or 'functionality' for the realization of national aspirations. The critic Alexej Kusák has stated that 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'.⁶ This accentuation of political over aesthetic criteria might easily appear as the mark of cultural belatedness: two centuries of domination within the Habsburg Empire burdened Czech culture with a reductively political agenda. For example, the acrimonious, decades-long debates in the mid- and later nineteenth century over the allegedly ancient but actually forged *Královédvorský* and *Zelenohorský* manuscripts (which earlier generations had widely invoked as evidence that the Czech literary tradition was far older than the German and therefore possessed comparable cultural legitimacy), or Jan Kollár's (1793–1852) conception in *Slávy dcera* [The Daughter of Sláva] (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.⁷ Projecting forward, one can regard this trend as merging into the macro-narrative described above and as anticipating the utilitarian political conception of literature that characterized much of Czech orthodox Marxist literary criticism from the 1920s onward. Kusák, for example, discussing leftist Czechoslovak culture in the interwar period, writes: 'the Czech variants

6 Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945–1956* (Prague: Torst, 1998), p. 23.

7 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 sny* (Prague: Academia, 2015), pp. 127–28. For discussions in English see, e.g., Dalibor Dobíáš, *The Forged Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora Manuscripts* (Prague: AVČR, 2019); Susan Helen Reynolds, 'A Scandal in Bohemia: Herder, Goethe, Masaryk, and the "War of the Manuscripts"', in *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 72 (2003), 53–67; Alfred Thomas, 'Forging Czechs: The Reinvention of National Identity in the Bohemian Lands', in *Cultures of Forgery: Making Nations, Making Selves*, ed. by Judith Ryan and Alfred Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 29–51 (esp. pp. 41–44); Vladimír Macura, 'Problems and Paradoxes of the National Revival', in *Bohemia in History*, ed. by Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–97; Roman Jakobson, 'In Memory of V. V. Hanka', in idem, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 397–405; and Milan Otáhal, 'The Manuscript Controversy in the Czech National Revival', in *Cross Currents*, 5 (1986), 247–77. On Kollár, see Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1994), pp. 43–99 (esp. p. 59).

of many of the later slogans of popular character [*lidovosti*], comprehensibility, engagement, party character [*straničkovosti*], etc. have their roots precisely here in the *Vormärz* or Biedermeier period'.⁸ Thus, while the sort of orthodox Marxist cultural discourse Neumann represented ultimately achieved broad currency in interwar Europe by the mid-1930s, 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 and the avant-garde.

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.⁹ Indeed, these discourses were intertwined and mutually reinforcing: as we shall see in Chapter Five, 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.¹⁰ This emphasis on functions is, of course, 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 aesthetics to linguistics to economic theory. So the question

8 Kusák, *Kultura a politika*, p. 26, and see also p. 121. Also see Pavel Janoušek et al., eds, *Dějiny české literatury, 1945–1989*, 4 vols (Prague: Academia, 2007), II, 24–25. Kusák identifies this reception as the implicit conceptual framework adopted by both Neumann and Zdeněk Nejedlý (1878–1962), two of the most dogmatic Marxist critics of modernist and avant-gardist trends in the interwar 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 Kusák, *Kultura a politika*, pp. 24, 72, and 135; Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 217–18 and 303–09; and Jaromír Hořec, *Doba ortelů* (Brno: Scholaris, 1992), pp. 68–72.

9 Irina Wutsdorff writes: 'Function is one of the central concepts of the Czech Avant-Garde of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, it was discussed in the context of functionalist architecture (theory), while on the other hand the concept became first a linguistic and then later a largely anthropological model in the works of Prague structuralism'; Irina Wutsdorff, 'Approaches to an Anthropologically-Oriented Theory of Literature and Culture in the Czech Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Prague Structuralism', in *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West*, ed. by Irina Wutsdorff, Michał Mrugalski and Schamma Schahadat (Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 632–52 (p. 632). See Chapter 1, note 71 for important studies with good bibliographies on Czech structuralism in English. 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. by Irena Žantovská Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), especially pp. 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.

10 Mutual influences between Mukařovský and Teige will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

arises: why should these functionalist developments have found such an enthusiastic reception and fruitful elaboration in interwar Czechoslovakia?

The post-National Revival discourse of cultural tendentiousness described above, with the 'belatedness' it implies, inevitably presents itself in this context. Tendentiousness, naturally, does not have precisely the same meaning or function in the nineteenth century that it took on in the twentieth. Yet the early exaggeration of the political function of culture might plausibly be understood to have produced heightened sensitivity to the variety of functions culture could serve and ultimately to have led to exploration of the specifically aesthetic function — a hallmark of Czech modernist aesthetics. Equally, the concerted attempts to overcome the legacy of nineteenth-century tendentiousness may well have inscribed it, in invisible ink as it were, within the culture of the emerging modernism and avant-garde of the Czech *fin de siècle*. Literary and art journals such as *Moderní revue* [The Modern Review] (from 1894) and *Volné směry* [Free Directions] (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.¹¹ In this respect the Czech *fin de siècle* represents a crucial break with Revivalist rhetoric and anticipates Devětsil and the interwar avant-garde.¹² Yet despite these conscious attempts to move beyond a conception of culture that was nationally focused and socially tendentious, traces of the earlier discourse remained. The critic F. X. Šalda, for example (who, as we have seen, was an important early supporter of Devětsil in the 1920s and had been 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. Yet Šalda did not argue for this modernist approach to architecture and culture purely on aesthetic grounds. At the end of his glowing review of Berlage's *Grundlagen und Entwicklung der Architektur* [The Foundations and Development of Architecture] (1908), for example, Šalda lashed out at the developers of the recently completed Prague Municipal House (*Obecní dům*, 1903–12;

11 On *Moderní revue*, see Neil Stewart, *Bohemiens im böhmischen Blätterwald: Die Zeitschrift Moderní revue und die Prager Moderne* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2019); and Otto Urban and Luboš Merhaut, eds, *Moderní revue, 1894–1925* (Prague: Torst, 1995). On *Volné směry*, see Roman Prahla and Lenka Bydžovská, *Volné směry: Časopis české secese a moderny* (Prague: Torst, 1993).

12 See Robert B. Pynsent, 'Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation', in *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Robert B. Pynsent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 111–248 (p. 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 *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctions and Disjunctions in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, 4 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 1, 348–63 (p. 349). One of the other major documents of the Czech *moderna*, the 'Manifest české moderny' [Manifesto of Czech Modernism] (1895), does advance 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.

see Fig. 3.1), now regarded as one of the central architectural monuments of the Czech Secession, but which Šalda asserted merely continued in the whimsical and wilful decorativism of retrograde Czech historicism. He lamented: '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'.¹³ In the early 1900s, therefore, Šalda still couched his defence of international modernism in a didactic argument: modernism was to bring cultural maturity to the Czech nation. Functionalism as aesthetic 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. Even a figure such as Jiří Karásek (1871–1951), an editor of *Moderní revue*, a long-term adversary of Šalda, and an outright *Décadent* who wrote that 'the attempt to make art socially useful and beneficial leads to the denigration of art into literary craft', never entirely shunned themes that were nationalist or socially didactic in nature, even if their treatment was often eccentric in nature.¹⁴ The historian Peter Bugge has stated the conundrum aptly: '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'.¹⁵

Paradoxically, then, the concept of functionalism, which underlay some of the most rigorously modernist developments in interwar Czech culture, just may have found such fertile ground there for reasons generally regarded as regressive. If such a 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 represented by Neumann in interwar Czech culture. More broadly, however, such an affinity would suggest that the macro-narrative of tendentiousness as an 'anti-aesthetic' to the radical and cosmopolitan character of European modernism and the avant-garde as a whole conceals greater complexities than first appears.

Teige represents a key case study in this context. Did the burden of 'belatedness' weigh on him as well? Is this the best explanation for that initial alliance with Neumann and the ideal of tendentiousness? In Chapter One we have seen how in cultural debates on the Left Teige almost without exception took the most radical side. This began early: in 1921 Teige argued that Devětsil must openly declare

13 F. X. Šalda, 'H. P. Berlage: Grundlagen und Entwicklung der Architektur' (1909), in idem, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička, and Karel Dvořák (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1953), xvi, 353.

14 Jiří Karásek, 'Sociální užitečnost umění' [The Social Usefulness of Art] (1895), here cited from *Moderní revue, 1894–1925*, ed. by Urban and Merhaut, pp. 292–93 (p. 292). See Pynsent, 'Czech Decadence', p. 351.

15 Peter Bugge, 'Naked Masks: Arthur Breisky or How to be a Czech Decadent', in *Slovo a smysl / Word & Sense*, 3.5 (2006), 259–75 (p. 262).



FIG. 3.1. Prague Municipal House (*Obecní dům*), 1903–1912.
Prague City Archives

loyalty to communism rather than a more generalized and non-partisan idea of revolution (and during the 1920s he criticized Breton's Surrealists for their failure to do the same); in the mid-1920s Teige clashed with Devětsil's architectural section ARDEV over his strict understanding of the functionalist imperative; the ARDEV conflicts clearly presaged Teige's famous polemic at the end of the 1920s with Le Corbusier, in which Teige again took the more radical functionalist position; and finally, and most fatefully, in the Generational Discussion that shook Devětsil at the turn to the 1930s Teige took the side of those defending the ascent of the hard-line Klement Gottwald leadership within the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Teige's rejection of the tradition of nineteenth-century Czech nationalism and historicism, and later his resistance to the Socialist Realist imperative that committed art and literature must present explicit political messages, were unbending. So the radicalism and consistency of Teige's avant-gardist 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.

All of this makes Teige's and Devětsil's brief moment of alliance with Neumann and the ideal of tendentiousness from 1921 until mid-1922 all the more puzzling. The mystery deepens further when one notes that, despite the swift and decisive move away from tendentious 'Proletarian Art' marked by the key anthologies *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* and *Život II* in 1922, Teige never articulated the shift between these early positions in the form of an open break.¹⁶ No less an observer than Šalda himself stated in 1928 that 'there is no break or abyss between the so-called proletarian and poetist layers of our youngest poetic movement'.¹⁷ This sense of smooth transition rather than radical break makes it difficult to regard the early alliance as simply an infantile disorder, a juvenile error that Teige and Devětsil quickly corrected. Šalda even wrote: 'What did Teige want to say in his programmatic article "Poetism"? Probably this: to the devil with literature, to the devil with art!'¹⁸ The near exact echo of Neumann's agitationalist exclamation, in Šalda's gloss of Teige's Poetist manifesto, indicates how muddy these waters are: Poetism is at once the diametrical opposite of that early embrace of tendentiousness, yet also its smooth continuation. So more is at stake here than merely the confusions of a young and perhaps overly enthusiastic thinker. What follows will examine the

16 Several scholars have noted this. See, for example, Esther Levinger, 'Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 48.2 (2004), 247–74; Zdeněk Pešat, 'Mezi proletářskou poezií a poetismem', *Česká literatura*, 50.5 (2002), 500–05; and Markéta Brousek, *Der Poetismus: Die Lehrjahre der tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975), p. 85. Levinger's account, however, 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 (p. 85) to the 'new beginning' marked by Nezval's joining of Devětsil (p. 79).

17 F. X. Šalda, 'O nejmladší poesii české', in idem, *Studie z české literatury*, in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský and Felix Vodička (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1961), VIII, 129–200 (p. 134). For Teige's own retrospective analysis of this period (albeit reflecting political pressures of the early 1950s), see his letter reproduced in *Výbor*, III, 581–86.

18 Šalda, 'O nejmladší poesii české', p. 188.

logic that guided Teige during that early shift from Proletarian Art to the avant-gardist positions adopted in 1922, focusing on two key terms: *lidovost* ('popular character') and *tendence* ('tendentiousness' or 'tendency'). My claim is that Teige was not merely working through, and out of, a Czech cultural legacy of belatedness that had generated such a strong historical commitment to tendentiousness in cultural activity. Nor did Teige simply turn with the winds of theoretical fashion, as so many of his detractors in interwar Czechoslovakia liked to believe. Rather, Teige's logic reveals smooth evolution rather than radical reversal: concepts that commonly count as aesthetically regressive led Teige to some of his most rigorously modernist positions.

Teige's early development shows the complexity and flexibility of conceptual oppositions that are all too often conceived as static. But this complexity appears in a more logically coherent light when viewed through the concerns about historical identity discussed in the previous chapter: for those concerns represent the true hinge between Teige's earlier Proletarian Art and the subsequent Constructivism–Poetism moments. Within the Czech literary historical context, the relation between tendentiousness and avant-garde functionalism calls into question 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 the avant-garde and conceptual trends generally deemed antagonistic to modernism and the avant-garde, contact points related to the idea of 'historical integrity'. The micro-narrative of the Czech case thus follows a less trodden path through the conceptual topography of modernism: this byroad 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.

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.¹⁹ Even in his very early texts, however, Teige subjected

19 This can be seen as early as Josef Jungmann's *Second Conversation on the Czech Language* (1806): 'What should I say about those [who] think that if they do not know Czech it makes them fine milords and 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'; Josef Jungmann, 'O jazyku českém: Rozmlouvání druhé', in Josef Jungmann, *Boj o obrození národa: Výbor z díla Josefa Jungmanna*, ed. by Felix Vodička (Prague: F. Kosek, 1948), pp.

this traditional understanding of *lidovost* to sarcastic critique. In 1921 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*, revelling in reds and a multitude of colours, the essential yield of the artistic labours of the Czechoslovak people! What a feast for the eyes to see national and Slavic flags unfurled and garnishing the façades of tall buildings, otherwise grey 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!²⁰

In contrast to the nostalgic or romanticizing image of *lidovost* he mocks here, Teige wished to 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*’.²¹ 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 (a point that was emphasized by framing his definition with illustrations of contemporary automobiles; see Fig. 3.2). 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] (1920).²² This eclectic collection constitutes a remarkable though little-known document in the history of modern art, and its influence on the Czech interwar avant-garde deserves particular emphasis.²³ Čapek focuses his

31–50 (p. 44). Derek Sayer gives a useful account of the ideological resonances of the notion of the ‘Czech folk’ (*český lid*), especially around the turn of the twentieth century; see Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, pp. 118–27. 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), 637–53.

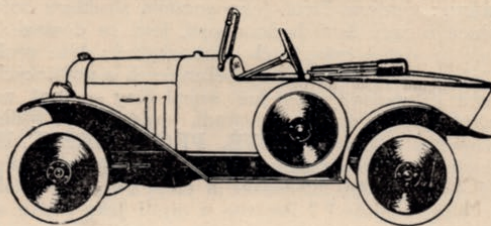
20 Karel Teige, ‘Nové umění a lidová tvorba’ [The New Art and Popular Artistic Production], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 150–54 (p. 150). *Slovácko*, or Moravian Slovakia, is a region in southern Moravia that was, and still is, particularly known for its well-maintained folk culture.

21 Karel Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’ [Art Today and Tomorrow], 1921, in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 365–82 (p. 378). Emphases in original.

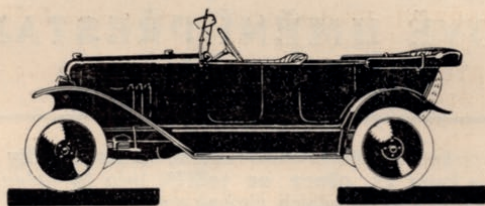
22 See Teige, ‘Nové umění a lidová tvorba’, p. 152. Čapek’s *Nejskromější umění* was published in 1920 but several of the essays had been published in journals in 1918–19.

23 *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.

Tendence moderního umění je dána jeho účelností. Je důsledností, opustí-li museální atmosféru a bude-li dýchat silný, zdravý vzduch země. Nechť je krásnou zábavou a cenným potěšením, právě tak jako film, představení v cirku či fotbalový match. Nechť přivlastní si touž technickou dokonalost a pružnost, jež je vlastní atletu či akrobatu, naprostou neomylnou funkčnost, vlastní stroji. Nechť je široce srozumitelné a lidové: ale touto



lidovostí nemíníme svéráz, národopis etc. Lid jest **jeden** od pólu k pólu: **moderní proletariát**. A moderní proletariát nenosí tyrolácké, slovácké či zulukaferské kroje, ani nezpívá koledy. Otokar Březina jistě není lidovým autorem. Tím méně však Sv. Čech.



(Automodely 1923)

Tendence nového umění, daná účelností, nemůže být ideologickou zevní náplní. **Tendenci plakátu je, býti plakátem:** co nejdůrazněji lidem něco oznámiti. Je sám o sobě tendenční skutečností. Báseň i obraz musí být tendenční skutečností, o sobě, integrálně; jeho tendence je pak rodná, nutná, jednoznačná. Obraz nemůže mít nikdy tendenci satirickou, moralistní, politickou etc., poněvadž mravouka, satira, politika není jeho úkolem a účelem: úkol obrazu je jiný, než úkol mravoučné knihy, karikatury či politického úvodníku; není proto však méně konkrétní a důležitý. Tendenci obrazu je, býti širou podívanou, obsáhlejší

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-nineteenth-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.²⁴

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.²⁵ 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 being his dissociation of *lidovost* from any specific heritage of rural folk art. Of the range of everyday objects that Čapek discussed Teige was most interested in those that came from urban experience and 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 interested not so much 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, responses that would soon become central to the felicitology of Poetism. *Lidovost*, he wrote, 'requires comprehensibility and amusement value [srozumitelnost a zábavnost]'.²⁶ Laughter was the sign of a positive connection between the proletariat and the otherwise so threatening everyday, modern world. Furthermore, the spontaneity of laughter represented a guarantee of truthfulness: when large numbers of people responded to something with laughter, then this was a force to be taken seriously. Thus Teige's twist on Čapek's ideas identified *lidovost* with a particular response provoked: art

24 Josef Čapek, *Nejskromější umění* (Prague: Dauphin, 1997), p. 9.

25 See *ibid.*, p. 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.*, p. 19.

26 Karel Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské' [The New Proletarian Art, 1922], in *Výbor*, 1, 33–63 (p. 57).

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.²⁷ Furthermore, 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.²⁸ Finally, Teige at this stage was quick to characterize practically all of the previous avant-garde movements as death 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.²⁹ 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'.³⁰

27 See 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 367, and 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 58.

28 Karel Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy' [Images and Fore-Images] (1921), in *Výbor*, 1, 25–32 (p. 26); Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 45; and Teige's 1923 review of Ilya Ehrenburg's *Yet It Turns*, quoted in *Výbor*, 1, 520. Teige long had conflicted feelings about Italian Futurism: Marinetti's politics were naturally abhorrent to him but he had deep admiration for the 'modernolatriy' he felt the Futurists had done much to propagate. In late 1921 Teige and Devětsil hosted Marinetti during his visit to Prague, but privately Teige referred to him as 'that nut'. See Rea Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde* (Prague: Kant, 2018), p. 173.

29 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 28. See also Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 49; and Teige, '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), pp. 119–32 (p. 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*, 6 (1926), 37–44 (pp. 38–39) (later incorporated as a chapter in *Svět, který voní*), translated in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. by Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), pp. 376–83 (pp. 379–80). Also see Jindřich Toman, 'Dada Well-Constructed: Karel Teige's Early Rationalism', in *Umění*, 43.1–2 (1995), 29–33; and Jindřich Chalupický, 'O dada, surrealismu, a českém umění', in idem, *Cestou necestou* (Jinočany: H & H, 1999), pp. 194–228.

30 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 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'; Karel Teige, 'Novým směrem' [In a New Direction], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 90–96 (p. 91).

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.³¹ 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. Indeed, precisely these resonances distinguish the Czech term from the German term 'völkisch' and allowed Teige to construe *lidovost* as something potentially progressive and cosmopolitan.³²

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 conception of humanism reflects this clearly: while in the earliest texts this had grounded his 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.³³ 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. Teige can thus plausibly be counted,

31 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 27. See also Teige, 'Novým směrem', p. 93.

32 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), 211–333 (pp. 268–73).

33 Karel Teige, 'Doba a umění' [Art and the Age] (1923), in Karel Teige, *Stavba a báseň* [Building and Poem] (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), pp. 24–52 (p. 28). See also Karel Teige, 'K nové architektuře' [On the New Architecture] (1923), in *Výbor*, 1, 112–20 (p. 120). Cinema was perhaps the central phenomenon where Teige saw ground being reclaimed against the alienating tendencies of technology; see, e.g., Karel Teige, 'Foto kino film' (1922), in *Výbor*, 1, 64–89 (p. 67). 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. As Levinger remarks, Teige implicitly regarded cinema as 'a modern form of proletarian art'; Levinger, 'Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia', p. 247.

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.³⁴ 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 humankind [*člověka*] as the stylistic principle of architecture'.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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 theatre, *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 [*odřůdy*] — many of you will say: deformities [*zrůdy*] — are nowadays the one and most characteristic popular [*lidovou*] literature.³⁷

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!'³⁸ 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, as we have seen, was for Teige 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

34 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 pp. 78–79.

35 Karel Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu' [Towards a Theory of Constructivism, 1928], in *Výbor* 1: 360–70 (p. 365). In the next chapter we shall see how this understanding of 'Constructivist humanism' complicates Teige's 'Mundaneum debate' with Le Corbusier.

36 See, e.g., Jan Mukařovský, ed., *Dějiny české literatury*, 4 vols (Prague: Akademie, 1995), IV, 199; and Levinger, 'Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia', p. 251.

37 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 58.

38 Ibid., p. 59.

criterion of spontaneous response, Teige felt, guaranteed that the new Proletarian Art would not be simply frivolous but rather that it hit a communal 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 felicitology of Poetism.

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 modern society, Teige identified that response with the achievement of a direct, or 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. 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*.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

The Efficacy of Art: *Tendence* and Functionalism

The second key term in Teige's early writings, *tendence*, underwent a swift and surprising evolution. It cannot be overemphasized that Teige — the later proponent of a radical elimination of didactic tendency, and indeed of narrative content as such — began his theoretical career as an earnest defender of tendentiousness. The early manifesto 'Proletářské umění', which Teige co-wrote with the poet Jiří Wolker, 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'.⁴¹ Teige and Wolker even quote at length

39 See S. K. Neumann, 'K otázce umění třídního a proletářského' [On the Question of Class-Based and Proletarian Art, 1923], in S. K. Neumann, *Konfese a konfrontace: Stati o umění a kultuře*, ed. by Jiří Holý and Milada Chlěbová (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1988), II, 388–427 (pp. 406–11). Also see Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavěk*, pp. 73–76.

40 See in this respect Jiří Stromšík, 'Rezeption der europäischen Moderne in der tschechischen Avantgarde', in *Moderne in der deutschen und der tschechischen Literatur*, ed. by Klaus Schenk (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2000), pp. 29–68 (pp. 52–53).

41 Jiří Wolker [and Karel Teige], 'Proletářské umění' [Proletarian Art, 1922], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, I, 220–24 (pp. 221–22).

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.⁴² 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.

The 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*'.⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ But 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 with the contemporary world. 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 insisted, it represented banishment, loneliness, and delusion. The

42 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).

43 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 49. Emphasis in original.

44 Teige quotes Havlíček Borovský (with the emphasis) in Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 54. His own comment appears on page 53 of the same article.

45 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 55.

doctrine of absolute artistic freedom was deluded 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 that would be a truthful reflection of the modern world. 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'.⁴⁶ Teige argued that the positive liberation enacted by the October Revolution, by contrast, released art and culture into areas from which they had previously been banished and brought them back into an integral relationship 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'.⁴⁷ 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 conception 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 merging of art and everyday life; tendentiousness functioned as a codeword for overcoming the autonomy of art.

But this early usage of *tendence* exerted a more specific influence on Teige's shift to an avant-garde programme as well — an influence that would have extraordinary 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*.⁴⁸ Teige translated the term *tendence* into a measure of the

46 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 33. This 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 Jiří Wolker, 'Ochránci umělecké svobody' [The Defenders of Artistic Freedom, 1922], in *Spisy Jiřího Wolkra*, Vol. II: *Próza a divadelní hry*, ed. by Jan Řezáč and Vladimír Reis (Prague: SNKLHU, 1954), pp. 238–40.

47 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', pp. 33–34. Teige's emphasis.

48 See Jan Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači: K otázce sepětí řádu umění a života v české poezii první poloviny 20. století* (Prague: Dauphin, 2007), pp. 122–24.

adequacy of art as a means of achieving its particular end: 'The tendentiousness of modern art is given by its *purposefulness* [účelnost]'.⁴⁹ 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 tendentious art as a false dilemma: both options were misguided due to their misunderstanding of the proper purpose (účel) or function of art. He wrote that the period following the French Revolution saw the emergence of

art that was ideological, literary and content-based, anecdotal and thematically tendentious [...]. Such ideological art is of course a flagrant anachronism in present times; even if its tendentiousness is of the most revolutionary socialist character still it was born of the petit-bourgeois spirit that, uncomprehending of the modern requirement for specialization and division of labour, and not confronting the question of its own purposefulness [účelnosti], demands of art something that is not in its nature, that is not its *function*, something that can be provided to the public far better by proselytizing, by a lecture, a sermon, a sociological study, or a journalistic opinion piece, than by the painter's brush or the sculptor's chisel.⁵⁰

Soon the term *tendence* became decisively derogatory for Teige, and the positive role originally assigned to the category of tendentiousness was transferred entirely to the term 'function': '[art] does not have any *tendence* at all — it does, however, have a certain natural function that is integral to it'.⁵¹ Conversely, Teige now associated *tendence* in its usual sense with anti-functional ornamentation, stating for example that *tendence* 'is as inappropriate to a poem as ornamentation is to a chair or lamp'.⁵² When he did still use the term *tendence* he did so tendentiously, so to speak, giving it the sense of the functional purity he now emphasized: 'a poem or image must be a tendentious reality in and of itself, in integral fashion [integrálně]; its *tendence* is then in-born, necessary, unambiguous. [...] To force *tendence* upon a poem, a novel, a sculpture or a picture in external, inorganic fashion is just as foolish as decorating the bare, functional, beautiful form of an aeroplane hangar with national bunting'.⁵³ 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 Teige and for the Czech avant-garde.⁵⁴ The external influences on Teige's formu-

49 Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 378. Emphasis in original. This passage appears in Fig. 3.2.

50 Teige, 'Doba a umění', p. 36. Emphasis in original.

51 Ibid., p. 45.

52 Karel Teige, 'Naše základna a naše cesta' [Our Foundation and Our Path, 1924], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 607–18 (p. 613).

53 Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', pp. 378–79. This reformulation of *tendence* as function was emphasized at the same time in F. X. Šalda's statements in support of Devětsil: 'All [great] art has been tendentious in this sense, that is, driven by the will and longing to serve a vital function'; F. X. Šalda, 'Literární anketa o nejmladších', in Šalda, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, xx1, 68–73 (p. 71).

54 Wiendl argues that this shift in the conception of *tendence* opens the door towards Poetism; see

lation 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 noted above, was one of mutual influence). But these external influences did not descend upon the early Teige as some sort of *deus ex machina* instigating a radical conceptual reversal, nor did Teige simply seize on fashionable trends from abroad. Rather, these influences reinforced and channelled a development that was already taking place in his thought.⁵⁵

The double evolution traced above — from *lidovost* to mass culture, and from *tendence* to functionalism — must 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. (Teige would later 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.) 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, wilful or forced, as if Teige simply wished to accommodate as many of the foreign trends he deemed important as possible. 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-orientated functionalism from anti-instrumental eudaemonism was not nearly as important for him as the shared nature of these two phenomena as *unavoidable* aspects of modern life. That unavoidability is what rendered them tools to uncover the integral historical identity of the present moment. In the case of functionalism this logic is clear: functionalism responded to physical and economic realities and manipulated them to the engineer's advantage. Functionalism thus respected the coercions that present-day material reality imposed, rather than denying them. But for the early Teige mass culture represented no less 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.

Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači*, p. 123. Ultimately this is true as well, though I would maintain that Teige's adoption of Constructivism occurs prior to his formulation of Poetism.

⁵⁵ This is of course in addition to significant Czech influences, such as the early proto-constructivist texts of Šalda discussed in the next chapter. See Brousek, *Der Poetismus*, p. 103.

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.

For Teige, function and felicitology both emerged from uncompromising engagement with modern reality. This ideal of direct engagement, of integration with the immanent shapes of modern life united Teige's theoretical endeavours 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 must not be interpreted simply through the lens of historical contingency, that is, as a remnant 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 spokesperson 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 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.

CHAPTER 4



The Style of the Present: Constructivism and Poetism

In 1929 Teige published a review of Le Corbusier's project for a world cultural centre called the Mundaneum. Le Corbusier had every reason to expect accolades: Teige had been a tremendous admirer and had been enormously influenced by Le Corbusier ever since their first meeting in Paris in mid-1922. Teige was not yet twenty-two years old at the time they first met, though he already had a reputation as a fire-breathing spokesman for radical artistic trends in the young Czechoslovak republic. Le Corbusier was in his mid-thirties and emerging as a leading figure among modernist architects. Teige's stay in Paris lasted three weeks, and in addition to Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant he met with figures such as Man Ray, Constantin Brâncuși, Fernand Léger, the Perret brothers, and Pierre Reverdy.¹ He returned to Prague electrified. In particular Le Corbusier and Ozenfant's conception of Purism provided Teige with an orientation point for various trends in avant-garde art, literature and architecture, trends that Teige already felt an irresistible urge to unify and portray as aspects of a new, integral cultural dynamic (see Figs 1.3 and 1.4). Le Corbusier and Ozenfant contributed two articles on Purism, one of them specially commissioned, to the early Devětsil publication *Život II*, which also featured numerous illustrations of their painting and architectural projects.² From this point on, modern architecture became a central interest for Teige — and for him Le Corbusier *was* modern architecture. Teige did not fawn uncritically, to be sure, and had hesitations regarding what he felt was a tendency towards 'classicism' in Le Corbusier's work. Yet less than a year after their first meeting, in an article inspired by Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* (1921), Teige hailed his work as 'the sign of a new dawn of the architectural era'.³

1 See Rea Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Daniel Morgan and Stephan von Pohl (Prague: KANT, 2018), pp. 92–96; Otakar Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda* (Prague: Prostor, 1998), p. 170; and Vratislav Effenberger, 'Nové umění', in Teige, *Výbor*, 1, 575–619 (p. 588).

2 Ozenfant and Jeanneret [sic], 'Purismus', in *Život II: Nové umění, konstrukce, soudobá intelektuální aktivita*, ed. by Jaromír Krejcar [Life II: New Art, Construction, Contemporary Intellectual Activity] (Prague: Umělecká beseda, 1922), pp. 17–27. At the end of the article is a note stating 'original article' and 'authorized translation kt'.

3 Karel Teige, 'Towards a New Architecture', in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská Murray and David Britt (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 309–15 (p. 315); Karel Teige, 'K nové architektuře', in *Výbor*, 1, 112–20 (p. 120).



FIG. 4.1. On the roof of the YWCA in Prague, October 1928. Above: Teige, Le Corbusier, Jan Koula, and Oldřich Tyl. Below: Teige, Koula, Hélène de Mandrot, Tyl, and Le Corbusier. Captions in Teige's handwriting. Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archives

Six years later Teige was able to reciprocate Le Corbusier's hospitality. The alliance between the two men was as strong as ever: just a few months before Le Corbusier's visit, Teige had come vigorously to his defence with a withering condemnation of the 'scandalous' competition for the Palace of the League of Nations, which had passed over Le Corbusier for first prize.⁴ The eminent Swiss, now widely acknowledged as one of the most influential modernist architects in the world, visited Prague for a week in October of 1928 before continuing to Moscow. Teige played host (Fig. 4.1).

Le Corbusier gave two lectures during the course of his Prague visit, one at the express invitation of Devětil at their own 'Liberated Theatre' and to a packed audience. Teige published an interview (or, as he termed it, a *compte-rendu*) with Le Corbusier in which the master described his enthusiasm for Prague, both the charm of the old town (with the unfortunate exception of St Vitus cathedral) and the 'vigour, strength, enthusiasm, good will, and a bit of brutality' of the new Prague (with the exception of those parts of the city that struck him as rather too German).⁵ Le Corbusier spoke positively, though not without criticism, of the efforts of modernist architects in Prague, praising them for not succumbing to the 'illness' of *neue Sachlichkeit*, or 'new objectivity', as had the Germans. He devoted particular attention to the massive, recently completed Prague Trade Fair Palace designed by Oldřich Tyl and Josef Fuchs (1924–28; Fig. 4.2). This building represented an important milestone in international modernist architecture. As one critic has stated: 'At that time, the Prague Trade Fair Palace was one of the first large functionalist constructions in Europe, a building where the founders of the international style could test the virtues and pitfalls of functionalism on a large scale'.⁶ Le Corbusier had reservations about the ground plan of the structure and the lack of 'harmony in its proportions', pronouncing it 'an exceptionally significant building, though not yet architecture'. Yet Le Corbusier concluded: 'I congratulate Prague and the architecture here for being able to carry out such a grandiose construction. When I examined the Trade Fair Palace I understood how I should create large buildings'.⁷

Given this convivial background it is surprising that when Teige reviewed Le Corbusier's Mundaneum project, just shortly thereafter, he criticized it sharply.⁸ In effect Teige accused Le Corbusier of designing an avant-garde cathedral — now

4 R [= 'Redakce', editorial board], 'Le Corbusier a Ženeva', in *ReD*, 1.5 (1928), p. 189.

5 Karel Teige, 'Polemické výklady' [Polemical Points], in *Stavba*, 7.7 (January 1929), 105–12 (p. 106).

6 Rostislav Švácha, *The Architecture of New Prague, 1895–1945*, trans. by Alexandra Büchler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 263.

7 Teige, 'Polemické výklady', p. 108.

8 Karel Teige, 'Mundaneum', in *Stavba*, 7.10 (March 1929), 145–55. Teige extended his critique in 'Etapy vývoje' [Stages of Development], in *Stavba*, 8.1 (July 1929), 1–16 and 19–23. For an English translation of the former, see Karel Teige, 'Mundaneum', trans. by Ladislav Holovsky, Elizabeth Holovsky, and Lubomir Dolezel, *Oppositions*, 4 (1974), 83–91. Teige's critique thus appeared a mere two months after he had republished his very positive interview. (In 'Polemické výklady' Teige stated briefly that he did not agree with everything Le Corbusier had said in Prague, but that this was not the place to bring in his personal opinions.)



FIG. 4.2. Prague Trade Fair Palace (Oldřich Tyl and Josef Fuchs, 1924–28).
Museum of Czech Literature, Arts Collections

among the worst sins in Teige's opinion. Teige stated that 'in its obvious historicism and academicism, the Mundaneum project shows the present non-viability of architecture thought of as art'.⁹ Teige was not the only or even the first significant voice to criticize the Mundaneum project: his polemic was part of a campaign that also involved Hannes Meyer, Mart Stam, and El Lissitzky.¹⁰ But Teige's critique, together with Le Corbusier's response, has become synecdochic for the debate as a whole. That in 1929 precisely Teige, an enthusiastic supporter, should accuse the doyen of avant-garde architecture of practicing 'obvious historicism' is striking, and Le Corbusier was clearly stung by the criticism. Indeed, in one of the two lectures he had given when he visited Prague in 1928 Le Corbusier had himself polemicized against historicism, so Teige was turning Le Corbusier's own term against him.¹¹ Though Le Corbusier usually refused on principle to respond to criticism of his work, in this case he wrote a long response to Teige bearing the grandiloquent title 'In Defence of Architecture', alluding to the distinction he had drawn in his evaluation of the Prague Trade Fair Palace between a 'significant building'

9 Teige, 'Mundaneum', in English: p. 89; in Czech: p. 153.

10 See Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR: Theories and Projects for Moscow, 1928–1936*, trans. by Kenneth Hylton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 107–14.

11 See Teige, 'Polemické výklady', p. 105. Teige's accusation of 'historicism' was also pointed given that just a few months earlier he had defended Le Corbusier's 'dignified and modern' proposal for the Palace of the League of Nations against the 'pompous architecture of plagiarizing historicism and idiotic groundplans' of the competing proposals; see 'Le Corbusier a Ženeva', p. 189.

and 'architecture'. That Le Corbusier took the issue not only seriously but also personally seems clear from how he peppered his response with amiable apostrophes and repeated appeals to Teige's 'poetic' nature. He tried to convince Teige that their points of agreement were more significant than their disagreements, and that Teige was simply being swayed by what Le Corbusier had just praised the Czechs for resisting, the *neue Sachlichkeit* embraced by the Germans. Le Corbusier could only interpret Teige's charge as the implementation of utilitarian 'police measures' against his own 'quest for harmony' and aesthetic efficacy.¹²

The references to *neue Sachlichkeit* indicate that this quarrel involved more than just a personal rift. Indeed, architectural historians have interpreted the Mundaneum polemic as illustrating an inflection point in modernist architectural discourse, a moment from which the shared sense of innovation could no longer smooth over theoretical disparities. Invoking categories less judgmental than, yet analogous to, Le Corbusier's, George Baird has situated Teige's 'all-encompassing "instrumentalization"' within a general 'shift of tone [...] toward a radically matter-of-fact and materialist conception of architecture [...]', and Kenneth Frampton has written of the opposition between Le Corbusier's 'humanist' modernism and the 'utilitarian' radicalism of figures such as Teige and Meyer.¹³

What such accounts overlook, however, is that Teige's apparently strict and ungenerous evaluation of the Mundaneum was anchored in extravagant aesthetic claims Teige made elsewhere for Constructivism as the architectural 'style of the present'. The radical anti-historicism so prominent in Teige's Mundaneum polemic was driven by equally radical claims about the historical integrity of Constructivism. That Teige's merciless functionalism could be couched in such terms reveals a complex dynamic underlying the apparently rigid terms of his critique. Teige's

12 Le Corbusier, 'In Defense of Architecture', trans. by Nancy Bray, André Lessard, Alan Levitt, and George Baird, *Oppositions*, 4 (1974), 93–106 (p. 94). Originally published in Czech as 'Obrana architektury' in *Musaion*, 2 (1931), 27–52. Teige responded in 'Odpověď Le Corbuseriovi' [Response to Le Corbusier] in the same issue of *Musaion*, pp. 52–53. The French version of Le Corbusier's essay appeared two years later: 'Défense de l'architecture', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 10 (1933), 38–61. As George Baird points out, that Le Corbusier responded directly to Teige's critique was unusual ('Architecture and Politics: A Polemical Dispute', *Oppositions*, 4 (1974), 80). Jean-Louis Cohen writes that Le Corbusier did not harbour long-term hard feelings from the exchange, noting that a few years later he asked Teige to compose an article on his (Le Corbusier's) influence on Czech modernist architecture; see Jean-Louis Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 1–55 (p. 31). But that the exchange generated substantial friction appears undeniable.

13 George Baird, *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 133 and 70; Kenneth Frampton, 'The Humanist v. The Utilitarian Ideal', in *Architectural Design*, 38.3 (1968), 133–36, and see also his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 3rd edn (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), p. 160. Rostislav Švácha characterizes Teige's 'dogmatic stance' as that of a 'blind doctrinaire'; Rostislav Švácha, 'Before and after the Mundaneum: Karel Teige as Theoretician of the Architectural Avant-Garde', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 107–39 (p. 108), though Švácha also notes that 'Teige's anti-art and anti-aesthetics stance was essentially aesthetic' (p. 119). Otakar Nový describes the polemic as exhibiting the 'fundamental differences between a poetic, often imprecise creative artist and an uncompromising dogmatic rationalist, incapable of questioning his own truths'; Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda*, pp. 150–51.

copious writings in fields other than architecture, as well as the trajectory of his thought over the course of the 1920s, show a thinker more nuanced and more multifaceted than the allegedly puritanical functionalist of the Mundaneum debate. Attention to this context reveals a deeper significance to Teige's Mundaneum polemic: it reveals a logic of historical rejuvenation inhabiting even the most bracing rejection of historical precedent.

The Dilemma of Dualism: The Inescapability of Poetism

As we have seen, for most of the 1920s Teige's avant-garde programme was stretched tautly between two poles: Constructivism (enthusiastically adopted from Soviet, German, and Dutch sources as well as being influenced by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant's Purism) and Poetism (an original platform developed by Teige and Nezval and adopted by Devětsil). This dual scheme reflected a holistic drive and was intended as a grand reconciliation, yet it entangled Teige in a series of logical contradictions. The contradiction that was most crucial here was not, as one might expect, any of the familiar conceptual tensions between Constructivism and Poetism, such as rationalism and irrationalism, or purposefulness and anti-instrumentality. Those tensions functioned more as the fuel for the dialectical engine: their combustibility was what kept Teige's system moving forward. What ultimately revealed the route as a dead-end, however, was the very structure of the dualism itself. Here Teige confronted a dilemma, for his conception of Constructivism centred on a critique of architectural historicism that identified a conceptual rift that marred the integrity of historicist architecture: a conceptual rift that Teige, following the long-standing discourse within architectural modernism (sketched in Chapter Two), saw in the application of decorative layers of historical ornamentation on top of a functional structure that should have been deemed whole and complete in itself.¹⁴ Given the importance of this critique of a 'structure/ornament dualism' in Teige's writings of the twenties, the appearance of a comparable dualism in the Constructivism–Poetism model is striking indeed. Teige himself exerted considerable effort to avoid having Poetism appear as merely a decorative addendum to the severe teachings of Constructivism: an effort that not only involved an ever more laborious formulation of the dialectical unity of the poles but that also drove him to articulate his Constructivism in ever more radical tones (as Le Corbusier experienced at first hand). These efforts, however, traced a vicious circle: the more radically Teige pushed the limits of Constructivism, the more insistently Poetism appeared as its ultimate promise — while at the same time the more difficult it became to justify this dual structure given the standards of Constructivism. Teige thus confronted a dualist dilemma: a dualism that sprang precisely from the holistic ambitions driving his conception of Constructivism.

Thus, while the project of delineating a consistent theoretical framework for the avant-garde out of obviously incompatible principles may have displayed open

14 See, e.g., Anne-Marie Sankovitch, 'Structure/Ornament and the Modern Figuration of Architecture', *The Art Bulletin*, 80.4 (1998), 687–717; and Chapter One, note 61.

utopianism, Teige's utopianism was not simply the product of a theoretician's greed. Rather, this utopian aim of reconciling the irreconcilable can be shown to issue from precisely the most earthbound element of Teige's thought: his hard-headed functionalism. The prime interest of Teige's dualist program in the twenties, therefore, lies neither in his formulations of Constructivism or Poetism taken independently, nor even in his juxtaposition or attempted dialectical synthesis of the two poles. Rather, the dualism is significant because Teige unwittingly betrays that Constructivism could not even exist without Poetism. Poetism, whose felicitology was the apparent opposite of Constructivist rationality, was actually its inevitable logical consequence: it would have hovered as a ghostly presence even if it had not been explicitly articulated. The utopianism in Teige's dualism was due neither to naïve exuberance nor to wilful positing of a unity of opposites, but was rather the mark of theoretical consistency. The very purity of Teige's Constructivism summoned its radical antithesis.

This conceptual crisis came to a head for Teige at the end of the 1920s. The practical consequences were significant. Devětsil disbanded in the aftermath of the so-called Generational Discussion during 1929–30. As we have seen, Teige had come to see the heart of the Generational Discussion in the 'crisis of criteria' characterizing avant-garde artistic theory (Poetism) in contrast to the conceptual clarity of avant-garde architectural theory (Constructivism). Following the Generational Discussion Teige also abandoned the Constructivism–Poetism dualism, at least partly due to the dilemma at issue here. Teige 'resolved', but really just avoided, that dualist dilemma by focusing his attention for the next few years almost exclusively on the theory and sociology of architecture; when he did return in 1934 to artistic theory, the unity of Functionalism and Surrealism was presupposed but was no longer articulated explicitly as a dualism.¹⁵ It is hardly coincidence that Teige's rancorous dispute with Le Corbusier occurred around the same time as the Generational Discussion and its crisis of criteria. The specific nature of Le Corbusier's appeals to architectural beauty in the course of that debate surely struck Teige as symptomatic of that crisis. This context of the internal disputes within Devětsil and the internal lines of tension within Teige's thinking has not been reflected in most accounts of the Mundaneum debate, yet it opens a perspective that is dramatically different from the 'humanist versus utilitarian' clash most often presented.

15 See Chapter One, pp. 51–52.

Nietzsche's Elision: From 'Critique of Historicism' to 'Rejection of History'

The genealogy of Teige's functionalism reveals that at the centre of this dualist dilemma lay the very term that was supposed to guarantee Constructivism's rigorous consistency: the notion of style itself. Only shortly before Teige's 1922 meeting with Le Corbusier — which had led to Teige's articulation in late 1922 of a Constructivist program squarely within the mainstream of the international avant-garde at that time — Teige had been absorbed in those attempts to redefine and resuscitate the ponderous programme of Proletarian Art examined in the previous chapter. The slogans of Proletarian Art posited the nostalgic ideal of a soon-to-emerge 'Socialist Gothic' that would end the perceived aesthetic 'interregnum' by creating the stylistic paradigm of a modern folk art for the proletariat. Teige himself had written: 'a stylistic era is arriving such as history last saw in the Gothic, when art sprang from a single, unified trunk and there was no difference between the so-called great art of the rulers and the folk [*lidové*] art, consigned to oblivion'.¹⁶ Yet Teige moved away from that nostalgia-laced framework for 'the new art' with astonishing speed. Within a few months he had completely abandoned proletarian-art rhetoric in favour of celebration of technological media such as film and photography, declaring the primacy of the machine for contemporary cultural production.

Teige's adoption of Constructivism thus evolved from an early nostalgic longing for a new historical style that would give the present a standing equivalent to the great historical styles, and to the Gothic above all. But the promise of Constructivism to create such historical standing quickly became predicated on its radical rejection not only of all traces of historical decorative systems, but also of the very gesture of measuring oneself against the past.¹⁷ The ease of this inversion from millenarian expectations of *renewal* to confident optimism in the *new* suggests that the boundary separating nostalgic historical longing from militant hostility to past cultural forms is permeable.¹⁸ The distinction explored in Chapter Two between the critique of historicism and the rejection of History helps explain this early development of Teige's: though Nietzsche's rhetoric had, to be sure, retained

16 Karel Teige, 'Nové umění a lidová tvorba' [The New Art and Folk Production, 1921] in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Stěpán Vlačín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 150–54 (p. 154). For more on this 'Gothic' rhetoric in Czech modernist discourse, see Jindřich Toman, 'Medievalism in Czech Progressivist Culture: Notes on the Perseverance of a Totalizing Gesture', in *Ars*, 2–3 (1993), 166–70; and (with particular focus on the Prague Linguistic School) Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), pp. 181–83.

17 This shift intensified what Alan Colquhoun has described as 'the "crisis" of architecture at the turn of the twentieth century' more broadly: a change from viewing history as providing models for imitation to viewing history as 'an irreversible process' of unique events. See Alan Colquhoun, *Modernity and the Classical Tradition: Architectural Essays, 1980–1987* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. vii.

18 Daniel Vojtěch describes a comparable ambivalence when, in his study of Czech literary criticism around the turn of the twentieth century, he claims that modern literature moves between an act of breaking away from and returning to its own present moment; see Daniel Vojtěch, *Vášeň a ideál: Na křižovatkách moderny* (Prague: Academia, 2008), p. 55.

some acknowledgement of positive uses of history, the major rhetorical thrust had so effectively elided the distinction between historicism and History that it gave rise to this seemingly paradoxical inversion. Teige shifted smoothly from a perception of the present as floating within a sort of historical vacuum, with the consequent attempt to address this by navigating some sort of reinsertion into the historical flux, to the perception of the present as being mired in a surfeit of historical detritus, calling forth the attempt to address this through a radical clearing of the tables and a new instauration. The dualist dilemma — the insistence with which Poetism presented itself as the culminating product of Constructivism's new instauration — represents the trace of this origin in historical longing.¹⁹ Close examination of the logic behind this shift is instructive, for Teige's dilemma is not simply the record of an error: it reveals and replays Nietzsche's elision within the avant-garde thesis of a radical rejection of the past.

Iron Gothic, Socialist Gothic

The claim that socialist revolution would create the conditions for the emergence of a new and all-encompassing artistic style, a 'Socialist Gothic', was a common element of the rhetoric of Proletarian Art.²⁰ Teige used this idealized image to describe an art that would stand in some sort of immediate relation and be spontaneously comprehensible to the masses rather than only to an elite. He claimed that such a wide social grounding had been achieved most effectively by Gothic art:

In antiquity, Christian art was a secondary, derivative, immature style and only in the Romanesque period, when the break between the old and the new worlds occurred, did it expand to cultural and stylistic [*slohové*] dimensions [...], then to transform into the Gothic, which was able to develop into the most typical style. In socialist society, just as in the Gothic, there will be no difference between the ruling art and the underlying current of primary production. Popular [*lidové*] proletarian art will attain the same power as that which created the Gothic cathedrals.²¹

This idealistic image of the Gothic thus provided Teige with a model for the criterion of *lidovost* [popular character] that, as we have seen, played such a prominent

19 The new instauration at issue here accords with the notion of a radical 'interruption' or 'caesura' that Andrew Benjamin contrasts to the notion of 'simple novelty' (which he argues does not oppose but in fact conforms to the conception of temporal continuity characterizing historicism). Yet the lingering trace of historical longing recalls Andrew Benjamin's claim that 'what delimits the particularity of the modern is the conflict between attempts to reactivate [nostalgic,] synthetic conceptions of community [...] and the affirmation of the impossibility of this state of affairs'. See Andrew Benjamin, *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), pp. xvi and xix.

20 The appeal to 'socialist cathedrals' appears in the first major programmatic statement of Devětsil, Jiří Wolker [and K. Teige], 'Proletářské umění' [Proletarian Art, 1922], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 220–24 (p. 224). See also Vladislav Vančura, 'Nové umění' [The New Art], in *Host*, 3 (1923), 120.

21 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské' [The New Proletarian Art], in *Výbor*, 1, 33–63 (pp. 60–61). Originally in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (Prague: Verčernice V. Vortel, 1922), pp. 5–18.

role in his understanding of Proletarian Art. At the same time it functioned as an image to hold up in contrast to the autonomy of art in bourgeois society. From this perspective, capitalism appeared as a force that had alienated art from its natural function by pushing it along a course of autonomous development and separating it from the everyday concerns and interests of the great mass of people. Proletarian Art, by preparing the ground for a modern art that would be *lidové*, just as the Gothic had allegedly been, thus promised a release from the constraints of autonomous art and a return to the direct interconnection of art and everyday life that had been deformed in bourgeois society. In this way, Teige implicitly linked the revolutionary action of Proletarian Art with a process of historical restoration. Proletarian Art cleared the path for a return to the historical process of stylistic development that had been interrupted by the autonomy of art under capitalism.

The transformation of the Gothic into an image of artistic and stylistic integrity was of course widespread over the nineteenth century, John Ruskin being the author most widely associated with this discourse. But modernist architects, despite their hostility to 'historicism', could still be seduced by this image in the first decades of the twentieth century. A famous example is Walter Gropius's 1919 Bauhaus programme, which called for 'a new guild of craftsmen' that would forge the 'new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise towards heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith'; Gropius's text was illustrated by Lyonel Feininger's woodcut depicting a radiant cathedral.²² Umberto Eco provides a clue to how the image of an integrated medieval culture could appeal to twentieth-century architectural minds, not just as a nostalgic image but more precisely as an ideal of sheer integration of beauty and function. Eco writes:

The concept of integration comes to suggest itself in a central explanatory role, where an integrated culture is taken to mean a culture whose value systems are related to one another, within the culture's necessary limitations, by mutual implication. [...] This integration of values makes it difficult for us to understand nowadays the absence in medieval times of a distinction between beauty (*pulchrum*, *decorum*) and utility or goodness (*aptum*, *honestum*).²³

Teige had no difficulty understanding this absence of distinction between beauty and utility; as we shall see, this equation of beauty and utility was the main point he pursued in his polemic against Le Corbusier's Mundaneum.

The rhetoric of Proletarian Art clearly drew on all these international antecedents, but Czech influences played a determining role as well. Here the major influence is easy to locate. The literary and art critic F. X. Šalda, whom Teige described in 1927 as the 'founder of Czech modernism' and the 'herald of a new era in our cultural life', had written in 1904 of 'the new Gothic, an iron Gothic' portended by modern

22 Walter Gropius, 'Programme of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar', in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. by Ulrich Conrads, trans. by Michael Bullock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), pp. 49–53 (p. 49). See also the discussion in Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 106–07.

23 Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Hugh Bredin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 15.

industrial structures.²⁴ For Šalda, the Gothic was the most natural image for connoting the enormous potential for social cohesion contained in the true artistic styles. This strong definition of style (which Teige designated with the Czech word *sloh*, a word lacking the connotations of style as passing fashion or modish design often attached to the word *styl*) implied the power to reveal the various unrelated manifestations of a particular epoch as creating some sort of recognizable whole. In Šalda's words: 'Style is nothing other than conscience and consciousness of the whole, consciousness of mutual coherence and connection [...]. Style is in conflict with everything that breaks this unity, with everything that takes up and isolates details from the whole, links from the chain, beats from the rhythm'.²⁵ The true styles, by linking isolated details into a whole, thus revealed a distinct and recognizable physiognomy for an entire historical epoch. Šalda's emphasis on the coherent totality characterizing such strong artistic styles not only echoed Ruskin, whom Šalda greatly admired, but drew directly on Nietzsche's description, which we encountered in Chapter Two, of the 'unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people'.²⁶ Through Šalda, therefore, Teige's early exaltation of the Gothic as 'the example of an epoch that is stylistic [*slohové*] beyond reproach' strongly echoed the ideal of an integrated, creative epoch that Nietzsche had held up in contrast to the weak, historicist culture of the nineteenth century.²⁷

Particularly important for Teige's reception of this terminology, however, was Šalda's association of this strong notion of style with proto-constructivist discourse.²⁸ This association extrapolated from the notion, extending from Viollet-

24 Teige's quotations from 'Vůdce české moderny' [Leaders of Czech Modernism, 1927], in *Výbor*, I, 243–49 (p. 248). Šalda's quotation is from 'Nová krása — její genese a charakter' [The New Beauty — its Genesis and Character, 1905], in *Boje o zítřek: Meditace a rapsodie, 1898–1904*, here quoted from *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský, Václav Černý, Felix Vodička and Jiří Pistorius (Prague: Melantrich, 1948), I, 97. On Šalda's influence on the *Devětsil* generation, see also Vratislav Effenberger, 'Nové umění', in *Výbor*, I, 582.

25 Šalda, 'Nová krása', p. 93. In contrast to Teige's practice, Šalda does use the word *styl* in this passage.

26 On the influence of Nietzsche's *Unfashionable Observations* on Šalda, and on how Nietzsche's critique of historicism became intertwined with Šalda's critique of the formal eclecticism of the *Lumír* generation, see Vladimír Kafka, 'F. X. Šalda a německá literatura', in *Studie a úvahy o německé literatuře* (Prague: KRA, 1995), pp. 32, 45, and 89. Equally evident here is Šalda's indebtedness to Nietzsche's well-known description of the 'style of literary decadence' in *Der Fall Wagner* (in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 15 vols, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: DTV; Walter de Gruyter, 1988), VI, 9–53 (p. 27)). See also Jan Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači: K otázce sepětí řádu umění a života v české poezii první poloviny 20. století* (Prague: Dauphin, 2007), p. 126; and Pavel Kouba, 'Kritérium života: Šalda a Nietzsche', in idem., *Smysl konečnosti* (Prague: Oikoumenh, 2001), pp. 100–10. On Šalda's linkage of Ruskin to this conception of style, see 'Ethika dnešní obrody aplikovaného umění', in Šalda, *Boje o zítřek*, pp. 111–14 (pp. 112–13).

27 Karel Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti' [The Art of the Present], in *Život II*, pp. 119–42 (p. 132). For an excellent discussion of the philosophical ramifications of this concept of style, see Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, especially pp. 64–65.

28 Several commentators have pointed out that Šalda's transmission of such proto-constructivist concerns must be added to the influences on the early Teige alongside Soviet Constructivism and French Purism (Le Corbusier). See Eric Dluhosch, 'Translator's Introduction', in Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, ed. and trans. by Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. xv–xvi; Švácha, 'Before and After the Mundaneum', p. 109; and Markéta Brousek, *Der Poetismus: Die Lehrjahre der*

le-Duc well into the twentieth century, that the entire Gothic style was the logical, functional result of a small number of structural innovations.²⁹ By analogy, Šalda insisted, a new direction for modern architecture would not be found in any new ornamental vocabulary but rather in the structural innovations and strict logic of industrial buildings. Šalda wrote of the power of the impression made 'by a huge railway bridge, bare, desolate, without ornament, the sheer embodiment of constructive thought', and concluded that 'the new beauty is above all the beauty of purpose, inner law, logic and structure'.³⁰ Šalda opposed the integrity of the true styles to the ornamental architecture of historicism and of much of the Czech Secession, dismissing in withering, Nietzschean terms the empty pomp and pretence of another building that made much more explicit claims to represent its present moment in monumental form: the 1909 Prague Municipal House (see Fig. 3.1). Šalda wrote:

So the scaffolding has come down and now one can clearly see *what* will be representing [Prague]: [...] something immensely petty despite its enormous size; a sort of magazine kiosk on a larger scale. And next to it looms that fantastic, black Gothic tower, the [fifteenth-century] Powder Tower, that pithy verse from a stone poem, masculine and essential like the age from which it comes. It does not represent anything: it simply *is* what it is. Standing before it, you feel shame from the bottom of your soul for the representational piece of posterboard next to it and for the age with a paper soul [...], which] forgets that before one can represent, one must *be* something [...]³¹

Šalda here draws on that discourse fundamental to the rise of modernist architecture, connecting notions of style, clarity of purpose, and secure historical identity. Since Šalda was first and foremost a critic of literature and painting, his emphasis on the style-creating capacity of functional architecture is perhaps surprising. But this language almost certainly reflects the influence of Jan Kotěra, a student of Otto Wagner and one of the groundbreaking architects of Czech modernism, with whom Šalda co-edited the Secession journal *Volné směry* [*Free Directions*] at the time.³² In this manner Šalda set an important precedent for Teige through his application of terms stemming from the discourse of early architectural modernism — in particular the terms 'ornament' and 'eclecticism' — to art and culture in general.³³

tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker (Munich: Hanser, 1975), p. 103.

29 In the late 1930s the eminent art historian Henri Focillon wrote that 'Gothic art, so long thought of as mysterious and chaotic, was in fact based on an orderly and crystal clear thought [...]. No doubt its whole future was implicit in the single proposition of the vault rib, leading to the distribution of thrusts, the subdivision of the vault and the independence of the parts'; Henri Focillon, *The Art of the West*, vol. II: *Gothic*, ed. by Jean Bony, trans. by Donald King, 3rd edn (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980 [1938], p. 5). Focillon described the vault rib as 'a new structural member which proceeded, by a sequence of strictly logical steps, to call into existence the various accessories and techniques which it required in order to generate its own architecture and style' (p. 3).

30 Šalda, 'Nová krása', pp. 97–98.

31 'Reprezentativní dům pražský', in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, xvi, 433.

32 Teige regarded Kotěra as the only figure of the Czech turn of the century rivalling Šalda in significance as inspiration for the post-war Czech avant-garde; see Teige, 'Vůdce české moderny', pp. 246–48. On Kotěra's influence on Šalda, see Petr Wittlich, *Prague Fin de Siècle*, trans. by Maev de la Guardia (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), p. 139.

33 On the adoption of this anti-ornament discourse in the Czech cultural context, see Tomáš Jirsa,

Ornament and Eclecticism

This ideal of the true style served as the context for Teige's account of the failure of art in the bourgeois era. Bourgeois art had never succeeded in creating such a style, but the reason for this was not that artists in bourgeois society had been incapable of creating forms sufficiently beautiful or powerful. Teige had enormous (if selective) respect for the artistic accomplishments of the nineteenth century, and often emphasized how ground-breaking many of those accomplishments had been. Nor did Teige, even though a political radical, blame the failure to develop a true style on the absence of progressive political views among many of the most powerful or aesthetically progressive nineteenth-century artists. No matter how strongly the vision of an individual artist in the nineteenth century may have been motivated by concern for social issues or by outright socialist allegiances (Teige pointed to Courbet and Van Gogh as examples), no matter how brilliant the aesthetic achievement may have been, and no matter how pervasive the influence on the later development of art, all remained the visions of individuals. No such vision was so powerful that it could succeed, through sheer persuasiveness, to force its way to lasting cultural dominance. The vicious circle of bourgeois culture was, indeed, that precisely the aesthetic power of its greatest artists perpetuated and deepened the most insidious feature of its art: individualism, chaos, and the simultaneity of incompatible visions. To 'think' or 'will' one's way out of this dilemma was impossible. Every coherent proposal for a way out of the chaos simply took its place as one more monadic vision, and increased thereby the chaos.

Teige's explanation of this situation made use of a fairly orthodox Marxist argument. For a true style to gain hold, there needed to be a minimum level of social continuity. Previous ruling classes had aimed to preserve the existing relations of production, which constituted the bases of their power. This resistance to change, disastrous as it may have been for the establishment of more just class relations, did produce fertile ground for art. Precisely the social stagnation of pre-bourgeois societies had resulted in the continuity necessary for the development of a true style. As Marx had observed in *The Communist Manifesto*, however, the ruling position of the bourgeoisie was no longer based on preserving but rather on constantly revolutionizing the relations of production. For Teige, the resulting 'overturning of production, [...] creating chronic uncertainty and nervousness', and the repetition of cycles of overproduction and economic crisis, all resulted in an analogous 'pathological acceleration of the development of modern art, which cannot settle on a definite form of stylistic expression'.³⁴ This was ultimately why, in Teige's view, bourgeois art was condemned to a chaotic individualism. This was also why the emergence of a true style was contingent not upon strength of aesthetic

'Anti-Ornament', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art, 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bilek, Josef Vojvodík, and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 99–111.

34 Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti', p. 127. See also Karel Teige, 'Doba a umění' [Art and the Age, 1923], in *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* [Building and Poem: Art Today and Tomorrow] (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), pp. 24–52 (p. 29).

vision but rather upon revolutionary change in the structure of society. Proletarian Art functioned only as an anticipatory image (*předobraz*); the true Socialist Gothic could only emerge out of a transformed society: 'Style will only come with the new social order'.³⁵ Artistic and political revolution were thus linked for Teige not merely by a shared spirit of rebelliousness — which was of course a dominant feature even of bourgeois art — but by logical necessity.

This account of the necessary stylistic failure of bourgeois art served Teige as the basis for a further thesis: that bourgeois art as a whole (not just architecture) inevitably tended towards historicism. The pathological acceleration of production displaced art away from the present:

[...] bourgeois society, which is, on the whole, essentially anaesthetic, provided no positive impulses for art; hence historicism and the romantic turn to the past, the flight from everyday and class realities, appeared for several decades to be the only salvation from the general banalization of art. [...] The artist, under the influence of historical and economic-political shifts and circumstances, lived cut off from the mass of society. In such a state of emergency, the artist — incapable of living in a vacuum — invents a different society, which belongs to either the past or the future. Acting either as historian or rebel, the artist addresses his work to fictional societies or collectivities. [...Art] lives off of the spirit of negation, its gaze fixed on the past and the future.³⁶

This flight from the present meant that 'the connection between art and the spectator was broken'.³⁷ The artist in bourgeois society did not speak to the surrounding society, but in spite of it. Thus pushed into a relation of tension with the present, the bourgeois artist could express critical distance only through flight to spatial or temporal distances, that is, through exoticism or historicism (which Teige viewed as varieties of the same dynamic). No matter how justified or critical such negation of the present may have been, the result was indistinguishable from the dreamy nostalgia of the passive bourgeois citizen:

When frightened spirits feel the present to be too cruel, too unrelenting, too uncertain, that is when the perfect beauty of the past makes itself felt. [...] People begin to] live in the past or in far-off places, in dream or in reminiscence: in their minds they undertake adventurous voyages to long-past centuries or to the moon, the dead planet. Historicism, exoticism, and the revival of the Rousseauist idyll — these anachronistic forms of Romanticism turn the mind from concrete tasks and present life.³⁸

Aesthetic negation, in other words, was socially affirmative.³⁹ Or translated into

35 Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti', p. 127. See also Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', pp. 62–63, and Karel Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra' [Art Today and Tomorrow], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 365–81 (p. 376); originally in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, pp. 187–202.

36 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', pp. 44–45. See also Teige, 'Doba a umění', p. 39.

37 Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 366.

38 Teige, 'Doba a umění', p. 31.

39 For a comparison of Teige's sociology of art with Marcuse's account of affirmative art, see Květoslav Chvatík, 'Karel Teige a Herbert Marcuse o společenské funkci umění', in Květoslav Chvatík, *Melancholie a vzdor: Eseje o moderní české literatuře* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1992), pp. 57–74. German version: 'Herbert Marcuse und Karel Teige über die gesellschaftliche Funktion

Teige's emerging Constructivist terms, art under capitalism had lost its functional efficacy. Historicist art — and in Teige's broad sense, this included any kind of escapist art — through its forced abnegation of any meaningful role in the structure of capitalist society, became merely 'ornamental': art could perhaps cover over the banality and injustices of the present, but could do nothing to effect structural change.

Teige linked the historicism of bourgeois art to his claim about the endemic individualism of art under capitalism. He wrote:

The economic conditions of the nineteenth century led society to individualism, to that criminal level of anarchy in life and ideology which made style impossible, corroded the original collective pathos of the age of *Empire* and, through stylistic degeneration, spread the cruel plague of historicizing eclecticism in architecture, transforming cities and streets into a regular museum full of frightful exhibits.⁴⁰

Artistic individualism and architectural eclecticism both consisted in a plurality of self-enclosed and incompatible systems existing side by side. Both betrayed the absence of any reliable criterion to distinguish any one of the systematized historical styles available to the artist or architect as the primary or true style of the age. Teige would almost certainly have regarded the question that served as the title to Heinrich Hübsch's 1828 polemic on architecture, 'In What Style Should We Build?', as revealing the basic dilemma of style in an age of eclecticism and individualism.⁴¹ The very possibility of raising such a question, of feeling the possibility or indeed necessity of 'choosing' a style, indicated that none of the potential answers — Neo-Hellenic, *Spitzbogenstil*, the *Rundbogenstil* Hübsch posited as the answer, etc. — could ever be definitive. Teige would surely have found satisfaction in the fact that in 1898 — seventy years after Hübsch's text — architects' writings in the Czech art journal *Volné směry* posed the exact same question.⁴² The plurality of historicist styles was inescapable: unified style degenerated into mere stylizations, drawing architecture into the conceptual orbit of fashion.⁴³ For Teige, a choice for one or another of the

der Kunst', in *Die Frankfurter Schule und die Folgen*, ed. by Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), pp. 367–83.

⁴⁰ Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 44. See also Teige, 'Doba a umění', p. 39.

⁴¹ Heinrich Hübsch, et al., *In What Style Should We Build? The German Debate on Architectural Style*, ed. and trans. by Wolfgang Hermann (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992). Andrew Benjamin states that 'Hübsch's question marks the severance of style and appearance', meaning historicism confronted the dilemma that, within the dynamics of modernist temporality, style could no longer be understood to have a 'necessary connection to an already determined appearance'; Andrew Benjamin, *Style and Time*, pp. 41 and xii. Alan Colquhoun relates this dilemma to the inherent relativism of historicist thought: 'The [historicist] theory made it impossible, in principle, to favour one style over another, since each style was organically related to a particular spatiotemporal culture and could not be judged except on its own terms'; Alan Colquhoun, 'Three Kinds of Historicism', in Alan Colquhoun, *Modernity and the Classical Tradition: Architectural Essays, 1980–1987* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 3–19 (p. 12).

⁴² See Otakar Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda* (Prague: Prostor, 1998), p. 80.

⁴³ See Karel Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu' [Towards a Theory of Constructivism, 1928], in *Výbor*, I, 360–70 (p. 363). Andrew Benjamin emphasizes the importance of the distinction 'between the temporality of fashion — a temporality in which the new is simply posited — and the temporality

available stylistic systems could express nothing other than individual preference, taste, or interpretation. Teige echoed Adolf Loos's notion that any attempt to 'force' style through an ornamental system would result in nothing more than a superficial system, a woefully inadequate bandage on the wounds that the modern world bore.

Teige's critique of historicism thus had two distinct dimensions, corresponding to his use of the terms 'ornament' and 'eclecticism', both of which terms he used freely. The former term delineated what can be called the vertical dimension. The cleft separating ornament from structure in historicist architecture was the material expression of a much deeper tension within bourgeois art: the severed connection between art and its public, or more fundamentally, between art and its present. Ornament was thus the scarlet letter for the sin of art's autonomy. Further, because ornament was (in the logic of Constructivism) superfluous and merely covered over what was of structural importance, it constituted a deception or historical disguise that hid the true form and identity of the present. Teige's critique of historicism thus had strong affinities with both Loos' equation of ornament and lie and with Nietzsche's account of the dishonesty, deceptiveness, and protective *Innerlichkeit* of modern historicist culture.⁴⁴ The horizontal dimension of Teige's critique, expressed in the term 'eclecticism', referred not to tensions within the individual artwork but rather to the chaotic topography of the cultural landscape as a whole: to the existence of independent aesthetic systems existing side by side yet without any essential connection. Like the 'closed system[s] of partial laws' that Georg Lukács identified around the same time as one of the consequences of reified rationalism, these individual systems were complete in themselves and for this reason mutually exclusive.⁴⁵

Teige's critique of bourgeois art as inherently 'historicist' — a term it should now be clear he understood in far broader terms than simply historicist architectural practice — thus emerged from the context of his early theory of Proletarian Art. Teige in this period (1921 to mid-1922) portrayed the present as just starting to emerge from an aesthetic interregnum that stretched back to the beginning of art's autonomy under capitalism. Proletarian Art could only guess at and try to lay rough foundations for what would emerge as the next truly 'popular' (*lidový*) and all-encompassing historical style — the Socialist Gothic to emerge out of the ashes of revolution. The historicism of bourgeois art, therefore, had less to do with the dominance of historical themes than with the situation in this historical interregnum, this historical vacuum: bourgeois art was historicist precisely because

of modernity'; Andrew Benjamin, *Style and Time*, p. xiv. Ákos Moravánszky writes that Art nouveau 'was probably the most fashion-conscious of all architectural styles. Some of its critics even dismissed it as merely fashion'; Ákos Moravánszky, *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867–1918* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 105. Teige would have applied this claim not just to Art nouveau but to historicist architecture as well.

44 Hilde Heynen writes that for Loos 'ornament is that which people use to attempt to relate different aspects of life and to join inner and outer worlds in a coherent whole. By getting rid of ornament [Loos felt] the illusion is destroyed that a harmonious unity of this sort is still possible'; Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 95.

45 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 104.

it did not belong to any true historical style. Capitalism had interrupted the great narrative, and the Bolshevik revolution was the first sign that such a narrative was to be taken up again. Thus Teige's theory of Proletarian Art implicitly understood revolution in its etymological sense: as a return — at a further level of development of course — to an earlier state, that is, as the return to History.

At the end of 1922, with the publication of *Život II* and Teige's increasing focus on Constructivism, this scheme changed. This change followed a seemingly natural evolution from Teige's Proletarian Art rhetoric to his Constructivist terminology. We have seen that even within his theory of Proletarian Art, with its suspicion of the cult of the machine, Teige had begun to introduce functionalist rhetoric in the name of 'life' and of the reunion of art with the masses and the everyday.⁴⁶ He stated, for example, that 'art is a function of life', and that '*in the new world art has a new function*. There is no need for [the new art] to serve as an ornament or decoration of life, for the beauty of life, bare and powerful, does not need to be painted over or disfigured with dangling ornaments'.⁴⁷ Only a short step was required for this vitalist celebration of the beauty of unadorned life to develop into a purist celebration of the beauty of the unadorned machine: 'The beauty of a machine, of an automobile, is the beauty of reality and of the pure form, which doesn't need to be dolled up with ornaments or crowned with poetry'.⁴⁸

Underneath this apparently evolutionary rhetorical shift, however, a major change had occurred in the temporal scheme by which Teige defined the avant-garde. Rather than merely anticipating the end of an interregnum, Constructivism already revealed what was coming:

A simple glance at the world is enough to reveal the error of the familiar saying that we live in a styleless age. A style is emerging perpetually right before our eyes, a result not of aesthetic manifestos or a studio atmosphere but of the collective and largely anonymous, disciplined, and goal-oriented work of laborers and technicians.⁴⁹

With the adoption of Constructivism, Teige felt that the step into the new style no longer lay in the future but had already been taken. Constructivism was the 'springboard for the new culture and civilization' and represented, therefore, '*the style of the present*'.⁵⁰

46 Teige in this period was critical not only of the Italian Futurists for their aestheticization of the technology of war (see Karel Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy' [Images and Fore-Images, 1921], in *Výbor*, 1, 25–32 (p. 26)) but also of the 'machinism' he felt characterized much of the Soviet avant-garde (see Teige's 1923 review of Ehrenburg's *And Yet It Moves*, quoted in *Výbor*, 1, 520).

47 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 52, and Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 378. Emphasis in original.

48 Karel Teige, 'Foto Kino Film', in *Život II*, pp. 153–68 (p. 158).

49 Teige, 'Towards a New Architecture', p. 309, translation modified; 'K nové architektuře', p. 112.

50 Karel Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 331–40 (p. 331); Karel Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"' (1925), in *Výbor*, 1, 129–43 (p. 129). Emphasis in original. This proclamation has clear precedents in Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos. Heynen summarizes, quoting Loos's 1908 essay 'Kulturentartung' [Cultural Degeneration]: 'The real style of the time, the style that is in harmony with the actual character of the culture of one's age, does exist, but not where one would expect to find it: "We have

This shift in the status of the present altered Teige's view of the past as well. The first indication of this was that, by the end of 1922, the metaphor of socialist cathedrals and the expectation of a coming Gothic completely disappeared from Teige's vocabulary. He now denigrated such rhetoric as an expression of reactionary nostalgia and historicism.⁵¹ Now implicitly rejecting Šalda's comparison of an iron railway bridge to a modern Gothic, Teige wrote that in the nineteenth century 'architecture in particular remained mired in vain attempts at the plagiaristic reconstruction of past styles [...]. Gothic forms and ornaments were forced upon the iron constructions of railway viaducts'.⁵² More significantly, however, Teige began to use the term 'historicism' less and less as a historical category describing nineteenth-century bourgeois art and increasingly as a term describing a deficient aesthetic structure. The more the term became de-historicized in this manner, the more Teige began using it to describe all art before Constructivism. Where previously Teige had opposed bourgeois art to the organic unity of Gothic forms, by the mid- and later twenties this contrast between creative Gothic and parasitic neo-Gothic had disappeared. Teige portrayed even medieval art as an unstable 'compromise' between aesthetic and utilitarian functions:

This compromise was the stylistic, historical, essentially medieval trinity of fine arts: architecture as the leading art, then painting and sculpture. The individual arts then went through a similar process of compromise: the architectural styles [*slohy*] were various compromises between practical and aesthetic functions, between construction and decoration. Painting was a compromise between depiction and self-regulating colour composition: wherever the colour harmony did not have the upper hand over the task of depiction, painting also became architectural decoration.⁵³

Gothic in this formulation no longer represented an ideal totality: while its compromise solutions perhaps balanced the practical and aesthetic functions more deftly than did bourgeois architecture, they were marked by the same essential tension between construction and ornament. With this shift, even the historical styles came to represent for Teige only superficial or fashionable changes of form:

The most important cultural fact that the intellectual and revolutionary avant-garde owes to the great and celebrated communist Revolution is that today we stand at the gates of an enormous, complete, all-encompassing revolution — in this sense the first revolution in art that does not mean a mere exchange of one fashion, one school, one generation, for another.⁵⁴

the style of our time. We have it in those fields in which the artist, as a member of that association [the *Werkbund*], has not yet poked his nose"; Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, p. 78. On Le Corbusier's echo of Loos, see, e.g., Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), pp. 31 and 60.

51 See Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda*, p. 188. Teige later singled out for criticism along these lines the early Bauhaus under Gropius, despite the fact that Proletarian Art had used similar imagery at that time. See Karel Teige, 'Ten Years of the Bauhaus', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 317–39 (p. 318); Karel Teige, 'Deset let Bauhausu' (1930), in *Výbor*, I, 477–86 (p. 478).

52 Teige, 'Doba a umění', pp. 32–33.

53 Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu', pp. 361–62.

54 Karel Teige, 'Výtvarná práce sovětského Ruska' [Creative Work in Soviet Russia, 1927], in *Výbor*, I, 250–307 (p. 272); originally in Karel Teige, *Sovětská kultura* (Prague: Odeon, 1927), pp. 41–99.

Constructivism thus no longer occupied the position of a restoration or a modern Gothic. Rather it represented a clean break with all previous 'ornamental' architecture, a radical new beginning.

Where Proletarian Art had portrayed the historicism of bourgeois art as the result of its existence within the historical vacuum created by capitalism, Constructivism elided all differences between historicism and the very category of History. Everything that had come before the clean sweep of Constructivism now bore for Teige the stigma of historicism. Precisely the de-anchoring of the term as a label for a particular phenomenon in nineteenth-century art allowed Teige to transfer the negative connotations associated with bourgeois historicism to the past as a whole. Teige thus replayed the elision between historicism and History that Nietzsche had suggested so powerfully. So the temporal scheme supporting Teige's adoption of Constructivism rested on a paradox: Teige's elision of History and historicism in effect implied that the entire history of culture had unfolded in a historical vacuum. Only with the new instauration of Constructivism, that is, with the radical rejection of the past as such, could a 'truly' historical epoch commence.

The Dead-Ends of Dualism

Constructivism had barely assumed the centre stage in Teige's theoretical discourse when it suddenly had to share the spotlight. Over the course of 1923, the credo of Poetism — Czech culture's most original contribution to the interwar avant-garde — emerged as a counterpart to Constructivism. While Poetism was formed from a confluence of sources (Teige and the poet Vítězslav Nezval being the most important), the conjoining of Constructivism and Poetism into a double programme was entirely Teige's contribution.⁵⁵

At first sight, the conjunction is strange indeed. While in this period Teige was establishing an international reputation as one of the most ideologically severe proponents of Constructivism, in Czechoslovakia he was becoming equally known for statements such as that 'the art that Poetism brings is nonchalant, frolicsome, fantastical, playful, unheroic, and amorous', that Poetism is 'nothing other than an amorous inclination toward life and its manifestations, the passion of modernity, [...] nothing other than happiness, love and poetry, heavenly things', and that Poetism 'is shifting emphasis in the direction of the pleasures and beauties of life, away from musty workshops and ateliers; it is the signpost of a path that does not lead from anywhere to anywhere, but which revolves in a resplendent fragrant park, because it is the path of life'.⁵⁶ This Poetist paradise, with its eudemonism and emphasis

55 On this double origin of Poetism, see Brousek, *Der Poetismus*, pp. 81–87. Bedřich Václavek, who was also a member of Devětsil in the twenties and in the thirties a proponent of Socialist Realism, following Teige, developed a similar dual programme around the poles of 'pure' and 'purposeful' art (*čistá a účelná tvorba*); see Oleg Sus, 'Estetické antinomie v české levé avantgardě', in Oleg Sus, *Estetické problémy pod napětím: Meziválečná avantgarda, surrealismus, levice* (Prague: Jůza & Jůzová, 1992), pp. 12–34.

56 Karel Teige, 'Poetism', trans. by Ian Finlay, in *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourses*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023), pp. 151–56 (p. 153); 'Poetismus' (1924), in *Výbor*, I, 121–28 (123–24).

on anti-instrumental action, is clearly a very different place from the space of Constructivism, characterized by the ‘anonymous, disciplined, and goal-oriented work of laborers and technicians’.⁵⁷ The terms appear to be not complementary but rather contradictory. Where Constructivism demanded discipline, order, and a pragmatic outlook, Poetism celebrated the free play of imagination and the carefree indulgence of the senses. Essentially, this tension resulted from the simultaneous exaltation of hyper-rationality and of a lyrical irrationality.

Teige nevertheless insisted (at least until the later twenties) that Constructivism and Poetism were both the logical result of a single phenomenon: the withering of the category of art as such. Teige claimed that Constructivism, through its rejection of ‘an *a priori* aesthetic order’ and ‘traditional forms’, enacted nothing less than ‘*the systematic liquidation of art*’. The very category of ‘art’ implied formalism: Teige proclaimed that whereas ‘the domain of all previous art was formalism [...] Constructivism heralds the denial of formalism through functionalism’.⁵⁸ Analogously, Poetism rejected both the professional artist and the traditional genres and media of art, claiming that ‘the new art will cease to be art’ and extolling the clown, the traveller, the amateur athlete, and the like as the unacknowledged legislators of the new age.⁵⁹

Clearly, Teige’s rejection of ‘art’ — following a common pattern in the historical avant-garde — was understood as a renewal or reinvigoration of the aesthetic. Constructivism and Poetism were to imbue everyday life with aesthetic efficacy through a transformation of modes and habits of perception. This sublation of the category of art united Constructivism and Poetism in a libratory act that Teige portrayed metaphorically:

The new, endless, and scintillating beauty of the world is the daughter of current life. It was not born from aesthetic speculation or from a Romantic atelier mentality, but is rather the simple result of the purposeful, disciplined, and positive production and living activity of humankind. It has not taken up residence in cathedrals or galleries; it has found its home outside in the streets, in the architecture of the cities, in the refreshing green spaces of parks, in busy harbors and in the forges of industry that nourish our primary needs. It has not prescribed any formal recipes for itself. Modern forms and structures are the

57 Teige, ‘Towards a New Architecture’, p. 309; Teige, ‘K nové architektuře’, p. 112.

58 Teige, ‘Constructivism and the Liquidation of “Art”’, p. 331, translation modified; ‘Konstruktivismus a likvidace “umění”’, pp. 129–30, emphasis in original. In Teige’s account, Suprematism had performed the final liquidation of painting: Malevich’s white canvas had brought abstraction to its *ne plus ultra*. Suprematism could go no further, and consequently Malevich devoted himself to analytical work and Rodchenko and other leading Suprematists moved on to Constructivism, for which the liquidation of art was no longer the goal but the starting point; see Karel Teige, ‘Dnešní výtvarná práce sovětského Ruska’ [Contemporary Creative Work in Soviet Russia], in *SSSR: úvahy, kritiky, poznámky*, ed. by Bohumil Mathesius (Prague: Čin, 1926), pp. 119–79 (pp. 157–58).

59 Teige took over the phrase ‘the new art will cease to be art’ from the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg in his Constructivist phase and used it frequently in the mid-twenties. On the parallel between Constructivism’s and Poetism’s respective ‘liquidations’ of art, see Dirk Uffelmann, ‘Maximální funkčnost: Architektur und Poesie in der Theorie Karel Teiges 1924–1930 — Ein Baustein zur Genealogie totalen Denkens’, in *Österreichische Osthefte*, 39.3 (1997), 383–410 (p. 394).

result of purposeful work produced and perfectly executed under the diktat of a given aim and the economy. It contained the engineer's calculation and filled it with poetic vision.⁶⁰

The Poetist liberation of art from the confines of the museums and cathedrals thus led not simply onto the streets, into the city, and onto the stage of modern life. It led further: to the fringes of the city, to the factories and housing projects, redeeming these zones from the stigma of being extra-aesthetic. Thus Poetism's new perception, its new beauty, led directly to those urban areas developing under the aegis of Constructivism, expressing the aesthetic efficacy promised by Constructivism's implementation of the style of the present. This topographical metaphor of a city no longer divided into representative zones of aesthetic escape and banal zones of material necessity — of centre versus surroundings — is the clearest image of how Teige envisioned Constructivism and Poetism as forming an integrated whole.

Teige's conjoining of Constructivism and Poetism thus represented a clearly holistic gesture.⁶¹ This holism stands out especially clearly when the context of his critique of historicism is recalled. The dialectical joining of Constructivism and Poetism was directly motivated by the desire to overcome the eclecticism dividing cities into zones governed by different aesthetic regimes. With the principle that beauty lay in the functional, and with the production of aesthetically powerful objects that were integrated with everyday life through their functionality, the dual programme aimed at ending the division of modern culture into structural and ornamental realms. The dualism, paradoxically, was to inaugurate the 'unity of artistic style' that Nietzsche had called for half a century earlier.

The Arithmetic of Aesthetics

The radicality of this totalizing drive, as well as the aporia to which it led, emerged in full force during Teige's polemic with Le Corbusier over the Mundaneum project (see Figs 4.3 and 4.4). The Mundaneum was the brainchild of Paul Otlet (1868–1944), a lawyer by training but perhaps best described through unusual epithets such as 'activist librarian' or 'information theorist'. The Universal Bibliography he constructed over decades in the Palais du Cinquanteaire in Brussels — which at its height, in 1934, catalogued 15 million items and largely set the pattern for modern card-catalogue and decimal classification systems — represented a visionary conception for collecting and organizing the knowledge and cultural legacies of the world that bears comparison with Aby Warburg's contemporary library and 'Mnemosyne atlas', and indeed is often regarded as a sort of analogue premonition of the World Wide Web.⁶² The Universal Bibliography grew into the

60 Teige, 'Poetism', p. 152 (translation slightly modified); 'Poetismus', p. 122.

61 Uffellmann writes that 'Teige's thought between 1924 and 1928 can be understood as the ontological model for a *Lebensphilosophie* [...] claiming total legitimacy [mit totalem Anspruch]'; Uffellmann, 'Maximální funkčnost', p. 386.

62 See Alan Wright, *Cataloguing the World: Paul Otlet and the Rise of the Information Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For some quotations by Otlet that strikingly anticipate the operation

grander conception of a Mundaneum or 'World City', and eventually Otlet's vision was enthusiastically taken up by Le Corbusier, who drew up designs for a complex of institutions to be constructed in Geneva. (The global financial crisis of 1930 ensured these designs remained unrealized.) Otlet intended the Mundaneum to function as a cultural counterpart to the League of Nations, though he understood it as serving an incomparably loftier aim than the League. Pursuing the goal of furthering an internationalized civilization, the Mundaneum comprised the following institutions: an open university that would constitute 'the world's highest educational institution'; a world library; a series of exhibition pavilions displaying contemporary scientific and cultural activity; an office complex that would house various international organizations; and a world museum whose purpose would be to represent 'the present state of the world'.⁶³ In words that convey Paul Otlet's seductive vision but also anticipate Teige's critique of that vision, Teige described the Mundaneum project in Le Corbusier's composition as 'a monument to contemporary man [...], the modern equivalent of what the Panathenaea, the [Library of] Alexandria, ancient Chinese encyclopedias, medieval monasteries, abbeys and cathedrals, universities, kings' courts, escorial, Versailles, the French academy, the Russian academy of science, the encyclopedists and Port Royale were in their time' (p. 83; p. 146).

Teige's critique of the Mundaneum focused on Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's concept for the world museum. They had designed this building in the form of a ziggurat. (Teige, along with most later commentaries — including the following discussion — have, fairly or not, focussed on Le Corbusier as the main designer of the Mundaneum project.) Visitors to the museum were to start at the top of the pyramid and then follow a continuous ramp that wound downward, along corridors of increasing length as they traced the stepped outer wall (see Fig. 4.4). The museum would juxtapose geographic, scientific, and cultural exhibits and would be organized chronologically as one walked down the corridors. Teige had long argued — as far back as 1922 in the *Život II* anthology to which Le Corbusier had contributed — that ancient American architecture had much to teach modern Europeans, but such an explicit allusion was, he felt, a grave error. He wrote that

an axiometric view of the Mundaneum gives the effect of an aerial photograph of an archaeological site — Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, ancient American (Mayan and Aztec) or Peruvian. These historical reminiscences are striking. Remember the important building works of the Mayas, who were the zenith of ancient American civilization. These well-known ruins [...] represent a 'metaphysical architecture' of special cities of religious cults and burial grounds, cities of rulers and priests; pyramids, cathedrals of the sun, moon and stars; holy places of individual gods [...]' (p. 88; pp. 151–52).

of the modern Internet and social media, see pp. 8–9; see also pp. 14–16. On Warburg, see e.g. Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), and Matthew Rampley, *The Remembrance of Things Past: On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000).

⁶³ Teige, 'Mundaneum'; English: p. 85; Czech: p. 147. In the following discussion the English and Czech pagination will be cited directly in the text.

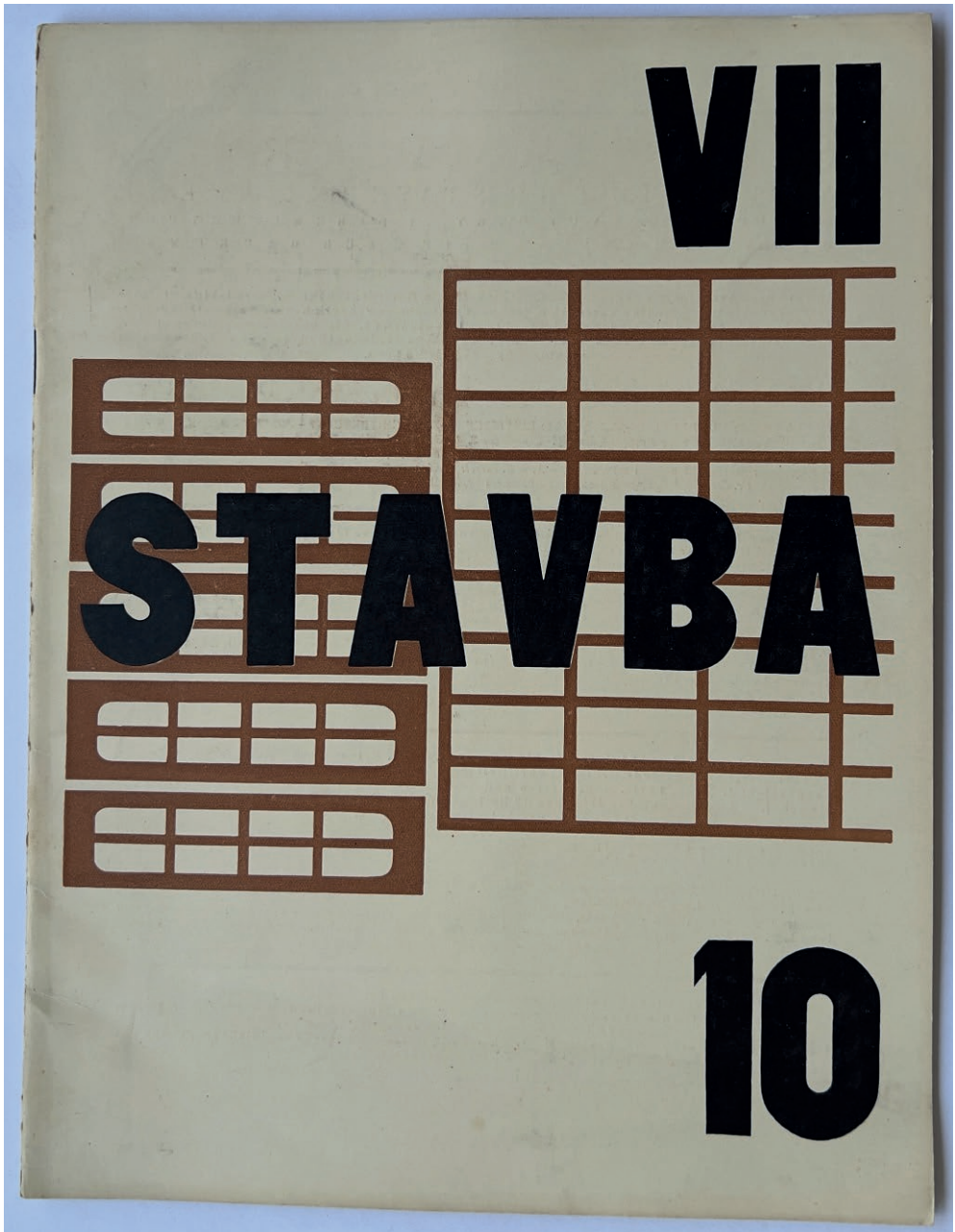


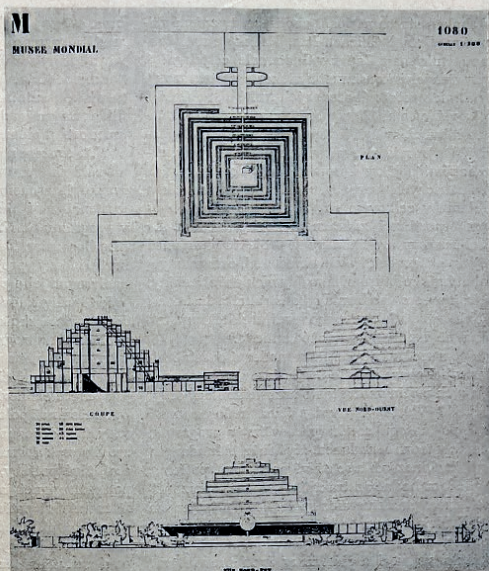
FIG. 4.3. Cover of the issue of *Stavba* where Teige's Mundaneum critique appeared.
Private collection

LE CORBUSIER
&
PIERRE JEANNERET

Světové museum
o Mundaneu
(půdorys, řez, 2 průčelí)

Le Musée Mondial
(Mundaneum)

Weltmuseum (Mundaneum)



i kanceláře olympijského výboru; dále botanická (s eventuelními zoologickými pavilony) a mineralogická zahrada (17), aerodrom a radiotelegrafická stanice (20). Posléze je k Mundaneu připojena residenční (hotelová) a univerzitní čtvrť. Hotelová čtvrť (10), situovaná na svahu pod esplanádou, je profata hlavní avenuí, budovy hotelů jsou rozsety souměrně v zahradách. Hotely budou poskytovat svým obyvatelům nádherné vyhlídky. Pod hotelovou čtvrtí, nedaleko od břehu jezera, jsou body komunikační: průjezdové nádraží, stanice autobusů a autocarů, přístaviště.

Studujeme-li podrobně Le Corbusierův a P. Jeanneretův imponantní projekt „Mundaneu“ poznáváme v celkovém řešení regulačním a hlavně v mnohých správně koncipovaných detailech, v architektuře jednotlivých budov, především ve skvělém řešení university s amfiteatrálními, nad sebou seřazenými učebnami a s velikou přednáškovou sálou, všechny ty kvality, které získaly Le Corbusierovu dílu obdiv a úctu mezinárodní veřejnosti

a zajistily mu vůdčí místo v dějinách moderní internacionální architektury. Naproti tomu celková koncepce, tak jak ji čteme z plánu č. 1077 (viz str. 145), působí dojemem nepochopitelně historickým. Není to jen budova Musea, ve tvaru pyramidy, funkčně nedostatečně oprávněném, jenž získává spirálovité seřazení místností, poskytující většího místa vždy novějším epochám za cenu temné vnitřní haly, (jejíž čtlostí z nouze je sacrum, a za cenu obtížného přístupu horem dlouhými cestami po rampách nebo sotva postačujícími vytahovadly,) jenž dává sbírkám osvětlení podélnými okny bez ohledu na světové strany, jenž působí dojemem architektury egyptského nebo spíše staromexického ducha. Axonometrický pohled na celé Mundaneum dělá dojem letecké fotografie nějakých starověkých vykopávek, ať už egyptských, babylonských, asyrských či staroamerických, mexických (kmene Maya a Aztéků) a peruánských. Tyto historické reminiscence jsou zarážející. Připomeňte si významná stavební díla kmene Maya, jež jsou

FIG. 4.4. Page from Teige's article 'Mundaneum' showing Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's design for the World Museum. Private collection

The ziggurat housing the world museum made on Teige a ‘puzzling, archaic [*historickým*] impression’ (p. 88; p. 151), which coloured his judgement of the overall conception of the Mundaneum. Teige commented that ‘Le Corbusier’s architecture for the Mundaneum project is not, of course, decorated with masks, ornaments, and sculptures as Mexican ruins are. It uses, of course, modern construction techniques and apparatus; but how can a work of modern architecture so strikingly resemble an American antiquity? Where do the roots of the non-modern, and in fact archaic [*historisující*], character of Le Corbusier’s Mundaneum lie?’ (p. 88; p. 152).

An important part of Teige’s answer to this question lay in the programme for the project, in Paul Otlet’s very conception for the Mundaneum. For Teige, this conception did not ‘originate from a vibrant, felt need’ (p. 88; p. 152) and thus had no grounding in the contemporary situation of European, let alone global, society. Teige’s instincts were on to something here: both Otlet and Le Corbusier had let Theosophical influences guide certain design decisions, and the inclusion of a ‘Sacrarium’ — ‘an architectural vessel to reveal humanity’s mystic power and “the hidden idea of the spirit of history itself”’ — shows the degree to which the Mundaneum included mysticist elements.⁶⁴ So there was certainly some justification for Teige’s claims that this extravagant plan was merely the self-indulgent whim of an intellectual coterie, ‘an illusion, a vain wish, a utopia, a music of the future, about which the only certainty is that if it does happen, it will happen differently than Otlet and Le Corbusier have imagined’ (p. 88; p. 152). For Teige, tasks that were not rooted ‘[in] actual need, [in] the dictates of life’ (p. 89; p. 152) simply could not give rise to truly modern architecture. Teige wrote: ‘Programs which are conceptually unclear, falsely stated, or moribund, cannot produce works of elemental clarity and purity. [...] Today we have no architectural solutions for churches, palaces or castles, which, in the purity and precision of their creative construction, can match the architecture of modern needs’ (p. 89, translation modified; p. 152). Otlet’s speculative and abstract programme, in effect, answered no modern need and thus could not be housed in anything other than an archaicizing structure; this had inevitably led Le Corbusier astray. In this respect Le Corbusier’s design was ironically appropriate. That the Mundaneum museum mimicked a Mexican ziggurat revealed that contemporary society required a Mundaneum about as much as it required a new mausoleum.

But Teige faulted Le Corbusier as much as Otlet. Le Corbusier’s approach showed a propensity toward what Teige termed the ‘error of monumentality’ (p. 89; p. 153) and hinted at why Le Corbusier had been receptive to Otlet’s idea of the Mundaneum in the first place. Particularly suspicious for Teige was what he saw as the latent aestheticism of Le Corbusier’s use of regulating lines, in particular the Golden Section, to impose what he termed ‘a monumental unity’ on the plan. (The charge of ‘monumentality’ anticipates Teige’s similar criticism of Stalinist architecture in the mid-1930s.) Teige also criticized details such as the orientation of the corners of the ziggurat along the points of the compass rather than in a way that would maximize light within the building. All of this, for Teige, revealed

64 See Wright, *Cataloguing the World*, pp. 183–84.

a design guided by latent symbolism, or an ‘*a priori* speculative system’, rather than functionalism. Le Corbusier had not been satisfied to respond to functional requirements but had felt compelled to ornament his design, turning inevitably to ‘those *a priori* aesthetic formulae which have been deduced from historical styles formalistically conceived’ (p. 89, translation modified; p. 153). The ‘obvious historicism’ of the ziggurat design, together with the ‘formalism’ of the Golden Section, represented the same crossing of History and formalism we saw underlying Nietzsche’s conception of ‘historicism’. And just as for Nietzsche, what was lost for Teige was ‘life’: ‘Life is neither, of course, symmetrical nor triangular nor star-shaped, nor is it in the Golden Section’ (p. 90; p. 155).

Le Corbusier responded to Teige’s critique with an unapologetic defence of terms that he conceded already sounded old-fashioned. Referring to the title of his response, he wrote: “In Defense of Architecture”, a very *Grand Siècle* title, I admit’. He continued: ‘Today, in the avant-garde of the *neue Sachlichkeit*, two words have been killed: *Baukunst* and *Kunst*. We have replaced those by *Bauen* and *Leben*’.⁶⁵ Thus Le Corbusier responded to Teige’s critique with a defence of architecture as art or as aesthetic activity, portraying this in holistic, Schillerian terms as a realm of freedom and harmonious balance. Le Corbusier felt that Teige had denied precisely the necessity of such a holistic vision, that he had failed to appreciate that architecture must appeal not only to the brain but also to the passions. Functionality was only the first step for the architect: what transformed a mere ‘significant building’ into ‘architecture’ (to recall Le Corbusier’s distinction when judging the Prague Trade Fair Palace) was the further step whereby the architect addressed the task of making the functional structure beautiful as well. Le Corbusier concluded that ‘the function beauty is independent of the function utility; they are two different things’ (p. 98). Teige, it appeared, had overlooked the beauty function.⁶⁶

Putting the polemic with Le Corbusier in the context of Teige’s other writings, however, makes clear that Le Corbusier misunderstood Teige’s point. Teige was quite as committed as Le Corbusier to the precept that avant-garde architecture be beautiful. His disagreement, however, was precisely with the postulate of an independent beauty function. Effectively, Teige reverted to the model of integration that had characterized the Gothic idealism of the Proletarian Art period: to what Eco described as the ‘pascalistic sensibility’, that ‘absence in medieval times of a distinction between beauty [...] and utility’.⁶⁷ This pascalistic sensibility underlay Teige’s insistence that architectural beauty could only originate from the strictest

65 Le Corbusier, ‘In Defense of Architecture’, p. 93. In the following discussion further citations will be given directly in the text. This English translation has been made from Le Corbusier’s French text published two years after his original response published in Czech (see note 12).

66 K. Michael Hayes, staging an analogous version of this disagreement, but with Hannes Meyer (a particularly close colleague of Teige’s) holding the position Teige held in the Mundaneum polemic, writes: ‘Le Corbusier’s is a poignant struggle to reconcile the fact of machine technology, the signs of industry, their representation and rearrangement in photographs, advertisements, paintings, and buildings, with the inexorable desire for contemporary objects with all the auratic power of a primitive totem’; K. Michael Hayes, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 102, and see also p. 99.

67 Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, pp. 19 and 15.

functionality. Four years before the Mundaneum polemic Teige had written:

One could object that certain machines, while perfectly functional, can still be ugly, even abominable in appearance. This is not quite correct. If they are ugly, it is above all because they are not truly functional; they are only relatively perfect and demand further improvement. We could say that an ugly machine begs further improvement, that ugliness is a symptom of inadequacy. We maintain that *the more perfect a machine is, the more beautiful*. And a machine is perfect, and consequently beautiful, only when not beauty but complete utility was the exclusive interest of its designer.⁶⁸

In other words, beauty would be found only when it was not sought.⁶⁹ Teige's problem with Le Corbusier's Mundaneum project thus had nothing to do with the beauty of the end result, but with the act of seeking beauty somewhere outside of function:

According to Le Corbusier, architecture as art believes that its mission begins where construction ends, namely with the rational solution and products of the engineer. It aspires to eternity, while the engineer responds to actuality. [...] In short, according to this argument, to become dignified as architecture, there must be added some 'plus' to the rational solution. Now this 'plus' can either help purposefulness and strengthen function, in which case it is simply purpose and function and is not a 'plus', or hinder it, in which case it is of course a minus. Further, it can neither help nor hinder, in which case it is superfluous and unnecessary, and that is a minus as well.⁷⁰

In Teige's view, this structure of the 'plus', or of a supplement added on to something already whole, betrayed that Le Corbusier's beauty function was nothing other than a more subtle form of ornamentation. While Le Corbusier felt that the beauty function completed the work begun by the utility function and thereby created a whole, Teige perceived an already self-sufficient whole being destroyed through the addition of a superfluous supplement. Expressed in an arithmetical image, both wanted to end with the pristine, unified whole represented by the number One: for Le Corbusier, this required combining the two 'halves' represented by the utility and beauty functions; but for Teige, adding beauty to function produced the equation ' $1 + 1 = 2$ ', thus a dualism, and internal rupture. Hence Le Corbusier's 'obvious historicism': this lay deeper than just the ziggurat design, for it was inherent in the claim that one added aesthetic value after completion of the functional structure, which was for Teige the theoretical equivalent of completing a building by covering it with a Neorenaissance façade or shaping it through the Golden Section.

Teige's hardnosed advocacy of the strictest functionalism, therefore, was not the expression of a dry, humourless rationalist applying 'police measures' against those with greater visions for architecture, as Le Corbusier had suggested. Teige's vision of the promise held by Constructivism was just as grandiose as Le Corbusier's, as

68 Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', p. 339; Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', p. 141. Emphases in original.

69 This paraphrases a comment by Jaromír Krejcar; see Švácha, *The Architecture of New Prague*, p. 270.

70 Teige, 'Mundaneum'; English: p. 91; Czech: p. 155.

the premise of a 'style of the present' makes clear. His expectation of a new beauty was also no less intense, as the credo of Poetism expressed. Indeed Teige went so far as to claim that the rigour of functionalism, by eliminating the stifling formalism represented by an ornamentalizing beauty function, would return 'humanism' to architectural form.⁷¹ The strictness of Teige's functionalism was, therefore, precisely the result of the enormity of his claims for Constructivism: the claim that it would heal basic diremptions of modern culture, the insidiousness of which was made clear by the way eclecticism and ornamentation could creep into the work even of a modern master such as Le Corbusier. The radicality of Teige's functionalist rationalism issued directly from the radicality of his totalizing vision.

This utopian hope for an integrated modernist culture clearly caught Teige in a vicious circle, expressed in paradoxes that Le Corbusier refused even to consider: a new beauty would result only from a radical elimination of the independent beauty function, and a humanist architecture would emerge only from the insistence that architecture take its measure from the machine and from its function. The ideals of beauty and humanism thus became unattainable the moment they were openly named; they needed to remain, as it were, always over the horizon if they were ever to be reached. These paradoxes, however, are not the sign of a logical failure on Teige's part. Indeed, given the functionalist premise, Teige's position is much more consistent than Le Corbusier's appeal to architecture as 'spiritual food'.⁷² These logical quandaries resulted rather from precisely the meticulousness of Teige's functionalist logic and the extremity of his totalizing claims.

From Base/Superstructure to Structure/Ornament

The final expression of this vicious circle was Teige's dual programme itself. Why did the effort to theorize avant-garde culture as an organic, totalizing unity take the form of a *dualism* of Constructivism and Poetism? How could this programmatic pairing of terms avoid repeating the historicist dualism of structure and ornament that Teige had all along taken such pains to eliminate? Was not Poetism simply a disguised form of the independent beauty function that Teige had criticized so vehemently in Le Corbusier? Appeals to the dialectical unity of the terms are obviously insufficient. The dualism degenerates too easily into undialectical formulations, several of which have become commonplaces in the secondary literature on Teige. Primary among these are formulations favouring one pole of the dualism as the 'primary' element of Teige's programme and viewing the other pole as the logical 'complement' to the first.⁷³ Other formulations view the dualism

71 Teige wrote that 'Constructivism, abandoning worn-out aesthetic principles, returned to man as the measure of all things'; Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu', p. 365. Statements like this further demonstrate that interpreting the Mundaneum polemic in Frampton's terms of Le Corbusier's 'humanist' versus Teige's 'utilitarian' positions runs against the problem that Teige was neither a utilitarian nor an anti-humanist.

72 Le Corbusier, 'In Defense of Architecture', p. 95.

73 Very few accounts in fact avoid interpreting Teige's dual programme primarily through the lens of either Poetism or Constructivism. The best treatments of the programme as dialectical unity are Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poezie: K vřvořovř dialektice modernřho umřnř* (Prague: Mladř fronta,

as an attempt to achieve comprehensiveness through a simple proclamation of the unity of opposites.⁷⁴ Such characterizations never raise the most challenging and most productive questions for an understanding of the Constructivism–Poetism conjunction, and those are Teige's own questions: how does this conjunction avoid repeating the historicist dualism it rejected at the outset, and if it fails to do so, what antinomies lie behind this situation?

The difficulty with the claim of dialectical unity emerges clearly from the most famous image Teige chose to express such unity. He wrote that: 'Poetism is the crown of life, whose basis is Constructivism. [...] It is founded [*bázuje*] on Constructivism's groundplan'.⁷⁵ The image is clearly meant to express the interconnection of base and crown, and the incompleteness of either element taken independently. But, like Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure to which it alludes, the image seems equally effective in suggesting the division between or the independent existence of the two elements.⁷⁶ In fact, Teige's image compulsively reproduces the fate of Marx's: it slips from an expression of dialectical unity to one of static dualism. Despite the legions of Marxists who, ever since shortly after Marx's death, have endeavoured to recover the dialectical vibrancy of the base–superstructure image, the ambiguity remains.⁷⁷ For the ambiguity is rooted not

1969), especially pp. 187–222, as well as his concluding essays to each volume of *Výbor*; Oleg Sus, 'Totožnost člověka uprostřed víru', in Sus, *Estetické problémy pod napětím*, pp. 35–47; and Květoslav Chvatík, *Smysl moderního umění* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965), especially pp. 76–77, 80, and 87. Uffelman's analysis ('Maximální funkčnost') is one of the most systematic attempts to trace logical consistency in the dualism through Teige's concept of function. The hazards of interpreting either of Teige's programmes as primary and the other as subordinate are illustrated in Vladimír Müller, *Der Poetismus: Das Program und die Hauptverfahren der tschechischen literarischen Avantgarde der zwanziger Jahre* (Munich: Sanger, 1978): shortly after describing Constructivism as the 'necessary complement [*Ergänzung*] to the poetist lifestyle' (p. 33) Müller quotes a passage from the 'Poetism' manifesto in which Teige in fact describes Poetism as the complement to Constructivism (see p. 35).

74 See, e.g., Jaroslav Anděl's claim that 'unlike other, better-known movements and organizations, which advanced one dominant principle (either rational or irrational), Devětsil [...] sought to achieve the improbable goal of wedding opposing artistic tendencies by capturing the polarities of the modern world and celebrating its beauty; this goal was expressed in the group's slogan: "Constructivism/Poetism"'; Jaroslav Anděl, 'The 1920's: The Improbable Wedding of Constructivism and Poetism', in *El Arte de la Vanguardia en Checoslovaquia, 1918–1938 / The Art of the Avant-Garde in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1938*, ed. by Jaroslav Anděl (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1993), pp. 21–119 (p. 21).

75 Teige, 'Poetism', pp. 152–53; 'Poetismus', p. 123.

76 On the comparison to Marx's base/superstructure image see Jan Wiendl, *Hledači krásy a řádu: Studie a skici k české literatuře 20. století* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova — Filozofická fakulta, 2014), pp. 38–39; Karel Šrp, 'Karel Teige in the Twenties: The Moment of Sweet Ejaculation', *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 10–45 (p. 28); Uffelman, 'Maximální funkčnost', p. 397; and Sus, *Estetické problémy pod napětím*, p. 40.

77 As Raymond Williams notes: 'It is then ironic to remember that the force of Marx's original criticism had been mainly directed against the separation of "areas" of thought and activity (as in the separation of consciousness from material production) [...]. The common abstraction of "the base" and "the superstructure" is thus a radical persistence of the modes of thought which [Marx] attacked'; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 78. The first figure to try to correct the mechanically determinist reading of this image was none other than Friedrich Engels himself: see his letter to Bloch of 21–22 September 1890, in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 760.

simply in the *locus classicus* of the base–superstructure image, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), but in a logical conundrum that lies behind that formulation: Marx's attempt in *The German Ideology* (1846, though not published until 1932) to articulate a 'materialist' theory of consciousness. Marx wished to describe a form of consciousness that would not have the corrupted form he derided as 'ideological' or 'mere theory', and he could only understand such 'de-alienated' consciousness as being absolutely integrated with material reality. But a conundrum emerged whenever Marx attempted to speak of such de-alienated consciousness independently. For the moment one spoke of such consciousness independently of the material reality with which it was supposed to be integrated, such consciousness again appeared as ideology, 'mere theory', and thus superfluous. De-alienated consciousness, being integrated absolutely with material reality, could not be 'pointed to' without reassuming the position of externality that characterized its corrupted form, ideology. Put another way, de-alienated consciousness could have no theoretical location, for if it had a location, it would be merely theoretical. Consciousness avoids floating 'above' the material, and thus being superfluous, only when it is absent. This conundrum haunts the 'base/superstructure' image as a whole. The very term 'superstructure' (*Überbau*) inevitably suggests something floating 'over' what is essential, and thus implies that this additional construction is an 'added plus' marring what was complete in itself.

Teige's critique of historicism provides a vocabulary to describe this conundrum: the conceptual model of base/superstructure all too easily degenerates into the model of structure/ornament. Through such slippage, the second element (Poetism, or for Marx, the superstructure) appears not as the dialectical counterpart and completion of the first but rather as something supplemental, unnecessary, ideological or parasitic. Teige's attempt to stipulate the unity of Constructivism and Poetism thus repeated this logical conundrum encountered by Marx when attempting to formulate a materialist theory of consciousness. Constructivism provided Teige with the same firm logical ground that Marx felt he held with the theory of historical materialism. For both Marx and Teige, this firm ground seemed to represent a promised land: the rigour, the hard-headed sense for reality opened up a vision of harmony and integration of the mental and the material. Poetism was Teige's name for this promise of harmony. But Poetism presented the same problem that the premise of a non-ideological consciousness did for Marx. Either Poetism was 'there', in which case one could point to it but it degenerated into simply another artistic programme, an *a priori* aesthetic system, or an ornamental layer; or Poetism was 'not there', in which case it was Constructivism alone. Precisely the rigorous internal consistency of Constructivism, however, was what had caused Poetism, as the experience of harmony, to appear in the first place, and thus the vicious circle began again. The promised middle ground symbolized by the images of base and superstructure, foundation and crown, emerged as a true utopia: it was nowhere.

Teige's dualism thus should not be interpreted as consisting of two poles of equivalent status or as a wilful combination of opposed programmes. Constructivism contained a certain corpus of principles deriving from the central criterion

of functionality, but Poetism was by its nature averse to programmatic formulation. In response to the question 'what is Poetism?' Teige had responded that it 'is nonchalant, frolicsome, fantastical, playful, unheroic, and amorous'. Poetism was a 'life atmosphere', a *modus vivendi*, and no more precise definition was possible.⁷⁸ Teige's second Poetist manifesto (1928) in fact criticized precisely the formulation of Poetist principles, which Teige felt were leading away from the molten experience itself. From a series of metaphors or an inspiring vision, Teige feared Poetism was turning into a movement or a school, that is, was ossifying into a formalism.⁷⁹ Thus the relation between Poetism and Constructivism was not one between counterparts or equivalent items in a series. Teige's programme was not strictly speaking a dual one because Poetism could have no programme.

The dilemma of this dualism therefore could not be avoided: no more moderate formulation or adjustment to the dual programme could have saved Teige from the re-emergence of the dualism he had sought to overcome. Constructivism was to implement its radically totalizing vision by rooting out eclecticism and ornament through rigorous application of the criterion of functionality. Poetism, by contrast, had no corresponding criterion or programme because it represented simply a manner of perception, a *modus vivendi*. In Teige's formulation, Poetism was neither more nor less than the enthusiastic reception of the world created by Constructivism. Poetism was therefore the necessary result of Constructivism fulfilled: it was the experience of a world in which historical integrity had been achieved. Poetism would have been there in theory even if Teige had never named it in practice. For Poetism — which destroyed the pristine purity of the totality claimed by Constructivism — emerged spontaneously from precisely those totalizing claims.

Poetism's spontaneous emergence from the claims of Constructivism was the awkward reminder of Constructivism's origin. The new instauration and rejection of all historical models upon which the emergence of Constructivism as the style of the present was predicated still bore the sign of their origin as the anticipation of a modern Gothic. The original complaint against bourgeois historicism had been its lack of historical plenitude: the interregnum signalled by the failure to develop a true style. But Constructivism had taken this account of the failure of historicism and made of it the failure of History; or conversely, the hopes originally placed in a renewal had been displaced into a faith in the new. Constructivism's style of the present thus harboured within itself the paradox that, while calling for the rigorous rejection of the historical, the result was still understood as the re-inscription into History. Poetism expressed this paradox. Poetism was the celebration of the new instauration and the achievement of a totality, but a celebration that simultaneously marred that totality and revealed that the instauration had taken the form rejected at the outset as the mark of historicism. The elision of historicism and History is characteristic not only of Teige's Constructivism but is definitive of the avant-garde

78 Teige, 'Poetism', p. 153 (translation modified); 'Poetismus', p. 124. Nezval described Poetism as 'a method of viewing the world so that it becomes a poem'; quoted in Květoslav Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavěk a vývoj marxistické estetiky* (Prague: Československá akademie věd, 1962), p. 79.

79 See Karel Teige, 'Manifest poetismu', in *Výbor*, I, 323–59 (p. 326). For further details see Chapter One, p. 36.

hostility to the past. The avant-garde critique of historicism, equating historical plenitude with the rejection of History, thus took the form of critique of a dualism it was condemned to repeat.

INTERMEZZO



‘Greetings from my Journey’: Pictures, Poems, Picture-Poems

Picture and Poem: Two Turns

The medial holism underlying Teige’s thought lent a major role to a modest word: the conjunction ‘and’. *Stavba a báseň* [construction *and* poem]; *báseň a svět* [poem *and* world] — these and similar formulations recur stubbornly in Teige’s writings, even providing the title for one of his most significant book publications during the period of the Constructivism–Poetism dualism (see Fig. I.9).¹ These formulations announce both a conjunction of media or disciplines (‘construction and poem’ alluding to an alliance between architecture and the various literary and artistic practices Teige saw as pursuing *poesie* in the strong sense) and a more general correspondence between the spiritual and the material (‘poem and world’ alluding to an intermeshing of aesthetic and pragmatic experience). So one’s initial impulse is to read the title of Teige’s 1923 essay ‘Malířství a poesie’ [Painting and *Poesie*] — a short but noteworthy text, as it contains his first use of the term ‘Poetism’ in print — as fitting within this series. To an extent it does fit, though we also need to be attuned to a slight yet significant shift in what precisely is connected by this particular ‘and’. Rather than materiality and spirituality (with their related disciplinary partners, architecture and *poesie*) the pairing of painting and *poesie* refers to a sensory linkage, an alliance between two modes of aesthetic experience — the visual and the verbal — and their corresponding vehicles: the image and the word.

The sense that early twentieth-century modernism and the avant-garde were deeply intertwined with a novel understanding of the complexities of verbal representation, with a cultural and philosophical Linguistic Turn that rejected the presuppositions of representational ‘transparency’ that underlay realisms and positivisms of various kinds, is familiar. Glossing Richard Rorty’s influential account of this Linguistic Turn, W. J. T. Mitchell has written: ‘Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and various models of “textuality” have become the lingua franca for critical reflection on the arts, the media, and cultural forms. Society is a text. Nature and its scientific representations are “discourses”. Even the unconscious is structured like a language’.² Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique général*,

¹ See Karel Teige, *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927).

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 11.

published posthumously in 1916 on the basis of lectures delivered in the preceding decade, has become at once the icon, index, and symbol of this shift, though what Walter Benjamin called the 'word salad' of Dada, with its transformation of the poetic word into opaque, self-referential object, is equally characteristic and exactly contemporary.³ But Mitchell aims to complicate any neat image of modern and modernist culture as a rolling aftershock of the Linguistic Turn by positing another fundamental epistemological shift as well, a Pictorial Turn. The chronologies of these shifts do not overlap precisely: Mitchell (who presented the idea in the early 1990s) discusses the Pictorial Turn largely in relation to postmodernism and later twentieth-century culture, connecting it with 'Derrida's "grammatology", which de-centers the "phonocentric" model of language by shifting attention to the visible, material traces of writing', with 'Foucault's insistence on a history and theory of power/knowledge that exposes the rift between the discursive and the "visible", the seeable and the sayable, as the crucial fault-line in "scopic regimes" of modernity', and with the way that the postmodern 'era of video and cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction, has developed new forms of visual simulation and illusionism with unprecedented powers'.⁴ Yet the origins of the Pictorial Turn clearly reach back further, and Mitchell also discusses it in relation to the Frankfurt School, phenomenology, Peircean semiotics, and even the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein (which might more immediately seem to evidence the Linguistic rather than Pictorial Turn). So if we subscribe to this claim of a Pictorial Turn, it would seem to have been not the Next Big Thing that displaced the Linguistic Turn after that had run its full course, but rather an only slightly delayed accompaniment or fellow traveller to the latter. The very idea of a Linguistic Turn may inevitably have soon raised the prospect of complementary or competing epistemological and perceptual shifts.

The modernist culture that emerged in interwar Czechoslovakia might well support such a hypothesis. That Prague, perhaps surprisingly, became one of the European centres for the development of linguistics, both in the narrower, disciplinary sense, and as a paradigm for theories of culture and society more broadly, is no secret. The ground-breaking work in linguistics, semiotics, and Structuralist aesthetics of Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukařovský, and other scholars associated with the Prague Linguistic Circle in interwar Czechoslovakia is a vitally important (albeit less noted) accomplishment, without which post-war European and American culture would have looked very different. And this work, strongly influenced by Saussurean paradigms, fits neatly into an account of a triumphant Linguistic Turn. As we shall see in the following chapter, major figures of the Prague Linguistic

3 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)', in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996–2003), III, 101–33 (p. 119). Hugo Ball's 'Karawane', with its incantatory incipit 'jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla', is a fine example of such a word salad; Ball originally intoned this text while wearing an outlandish outfit reminiscent of a monstrous lobster in a performance at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich in 1916, and he later published it in the 1920 *Dada Almanach*, printed in a jumble of different typefaces.

4 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, pp. 12 and 15.

Circle not only saw themselves as intellectual allies but were also personal friends and collaborators with members of Devětsil, including Teige, who took direct inspiration from some of the semiotic and linguistic explorations of Jakobson and Mukařovský and described ‘language as an unknown ground, the as-yet unanalysed material of culture and civilization’.⁵ Yet as Teige’s 1923 essay ‘Malířství a poezie’ — and in particular the distinctive new genre of the ‘picture-poem’ (*obrazová-báseň*) it proudly announced — makes clear, Teige’s simultaneous interest in something that can only be regarded as a Pictorial Turn is undeniable.

For Mitchell the Pictorial Turn is inseparable from anxiety about the power of images. Exemplary in this respect is the Frankfurt School, for which ‘the regime of the visual is associated with mass media and the threat of a culture of fascism’.⁶ This anxiety is thus associated not simply with a certain image of the image, but with a perception about how images are perceived: through spectatorship or the gaze, which easily appear as passive or submissive practices. The Linguistic and Pictorial Turns, therefore, raised questions not only about the production but also about the reception of cultural artefacts. In Mitchell’s words the Pictorial Turn encompasses ‘the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality’.⁷ For Teige, by contrast, the questions raised by the integrated Linguistic-Pictorial Turn that he felt the avant-garde enacted, and the novel forms of creation and perception they made possible, generated not anxiety but excitement. Teige did not label these ‘turns’ as bluntly as I am doing here, of course, but it is plausible to say that for him the Linguistic Turn enabled the transformation of language into *poesie*, while the Pictorial Turn enabled the transformation of the image into *poesie*: in this fashion these two ‘turns’ worked in tandem, helping to bring about the confluence of media, disciplines, and modes of perception around the conception of *poesie* in the strong sense that Teige deemed the hallmark of the avant-garde.

This is the context that lends particular significance to Teige’s announcement in the essay ‘Malířství a poezie’ of the practice of the picture-poem, often understood as one of Devětsil’s most original contributions to interwar avant-garde practice.⁸ Teige claimed boldly that ‘we stand before the logical consequence’ of a massive

5 Karel Teige, ‘Slova, slova, slova’ [Words, words, words, 1926], in Teige, *Svět, který voní* (Prague: Odeon, 1931; facsimile reprint: Prague: Akropolis, 2004), pp. 92–122 (p. 95).

6 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 13.

7 Ibid., p. 16.

8 On the picture-poem, see Esther Levinger, *Constructivism in Central Europe: Painting, Typography, Photomontage* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 253–59; Jindřich Toman, *Foto/Montáž tiskem: Photo/Montage in Print* (Prague: Kant, 2009) pp. 78–115; Matthew S. Witkovsky, *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007), pp. 42–47; Karel Srp, ‘Optical Words (Picture Poems and Poetism)’, in *Czech Photographic Avant-Garde, 1918–1948*, ed. by Vladimír Birgus (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 56–72; Karel Srp, ‘Karel Teige in the Twenties: The Moment of Sweet Ejaculation’, in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L’Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 29–41; and Zdeněk Primus, ‘Obrazová báseň: Entuziastický produkt poetismu’, in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, ed. by Karel Srp (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1994), pp. 49–62.

cultural upheaval, which dictates 'the fusion of modern painting and modern *poesie*. *Art is One: that is, poesie*.' He then proclaimed that picture-poems — compound, legible images intended for distribution through reproductions in books — 'are the solution to problems common to painting and *poesie*'.⁹

For Teige the picture-poem reflected underlying shifts in cultural production and reception in several ways. First, the picture-poem was a sign of the withering or overcoming of both the traditional image (*obraz*) and traditional forms of presenting images. Summarizing developments he had elaborated more fully elsewhere, he described how the development of photography had liberated painting from the task of naturalistic depiction, allowing the development of abstraction. But ultimately, while compositions without objects (as examples he cited work by Mondrian, Doesburg, and Suprematism) took this development to a logical conclusion they ran into the danger of complete loss of contact with the real world and, consequently, of 'decorativism'. So he asked: '*The problem of the new image?* Will it still be an image?'¹⁰ The answer was no: the avant-garde image brought entirely new forms of presentation and interaction with its publics, either as *poster* (in which case it served direct public functions and belonged in the streets) or as *poesie* (in which case it served as 'pure' graphic lyricism and would have widest effect as a reproduction in a book). Indeed it could perform both roles simultaneously when it formed the cover image for a book, which for Teige effectively served as a 'poster for the book' (and book covers indeed became one of the most fruitful applications of the picture-poem).¹¹ But on no account should it hang in a frame on a wall: 'The traditional framed picture [*obraz*] has been quickly abandoned and has lost any factual functionality'.¹² The new forms for the image, the poster and *poesie* of technological reproductions, both gave witness to the decline of traditional media and genres and to the increased mobility of cultural artefacts and greater closeness with their audience.¹³ Here Teige anticipated claims that Walter Benjamin would elaborate in the mid-1930s in his famous essay on 'The Work of Art in the Era of its Technological Reproducibility' about how mass, technologically reproducible art steps out of the enclosed spaces that were home to traditional 'auratic' art and reduces its distance to the masses. Benjamin's essay can be heard even more strikingly when Teige writes of the picture-poem: 'Sooner or later this fusion [of traditional genres in the picture-poem] is likely to bring about the *liquidation* (even if gradual) of traditional methods of painting and poetry. *Picture-poems completely conform to contemporary requirements*. Mechanical reproduction allows pictures to take

9 Karel Teige, 'Malířství a poesie', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlačín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), I, 494–96 (pp. 495–96). Emphasis in original. In these passages the term *poesie* hovers ambiguously between the specifically verbal idea of a written poem and the broader sense of generalized lyricism we have seen Teige often attribute to the term.

10 Ibid, p. 495. Teige offered fuller accounts of these developments in, e.g., 'Foto kino film' (1922), in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 64–89; and 'Umění přítomnosti', in *Život II*, ed. by Jaromír Krejcar (Prague: Výtvarný odbor Umělecké besedy, 1922), pp. 119–42.

11 See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 95–96.

12 Teige, 'Malířství a poesie', p. 495.

13 On Teige's broad claims for the significance of the modern book format, see Polana Bregantová, 'Teigova koncepce knihy 20. Let', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, ed. by Šrp, pp. 20–47.

book form.¹⁴ Part IV of this study will compare Teige and Benjamin’s claims about avant-garde, mass culture, and technological reproducibility in greater detail.

The second underlying shift that the picture-poem revealed was the avant-garde drive towards medial holism. The picture-poem represented how different media and practices could be melded into a shared project. One way this might be done is exemplified by what is now ‘unanimously considered a consummate expression of Poetism’, the 1926 collection of poems and images *Abeceďa* [Alphabet].¹⁵ This extraordinary volume brought together four creative talents, each contributing through a different medium: poems by Nezval were interpreted in movement by Milča Mayerová (1901–1977), a modern dancer who had studied with Rudolf Laban (1879–1958) and brought a number of his ideas to the project; her movements were then photographed by Karel M. Paspá (1899–1979) and set into typophoto designs by Teige. The images in *Abeceďa* do not, as we shall see, constitute picture-poems in the strict sense, but the volume brings into clearer focus one of the central challenges in interpreting picture-poems. The genesis of the volume was complicated: Nezval’s brief quatrains — one for each letter of the alphabet — had been composed in 1922 and were published in the Devětsil journal *Disk* in 1923, and then again in 1924 in his collection *Pantomima* [Pantomime], which contained a dedication to Teige. On 17 April 1926, Mayerová performed her dance interpretations while the actor Jarmila Horáková (1904–1928) recited the poems during a ‘Nezval evening’ organized in Prague in collaboration with Devětsil’s *Osvobozené divadlo* [Liberated Theatre]. Mayerová appears to have been the driving force behind this joint project. In the 1926 volume each of Nezval’s poems is printed next to a compound image combining a still from Mayerová’s dance interpretation set into a typophoto framing by Teige (see Figs I.1 and I.2).¹⁶

Abeceďa thus directly confronts the reader/viewer with this overlay of different media, challenging the interpreter to make sense of their interactions. Comparison of different poems/settings quickly makes clear that there is no single pattern or key. Let us examine two examples, selected more or less randomly. In the assemblage accompanying the poem ‘H’ (Fig. I.1) Mayerová’s pose is a fairly literal rendering of the letter H with the human body: her arms form the ‘goalposts’ of the top of the letter, her legs those of the bottom of the letter, and her right thigh forms the cross-bar in the middle. Teige’s typophoto is in one sense comparably literal as the

14 Teige, ‘Malířství a poezie’, p. 496. On the technical and conceptual evolution of the hybrid ‘photopoetry book’ from the nineteenth century to the interwar avant-garde, see Aleksandar Bošković, ‘The Avant-Garde Photopoetry’, *Književna istorija*, 48.158 (2016), 287–310.

15 Matthew S. Witkovsky, ‘Staging Language: Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book *Alphabet*’, *The Art Bulletin*, 86.1 (2004), 114–35 (p. 114). This article provides a detailed and sophisticated study of *Abeceďa* and the artists involved in its creation. See also the discussion in Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, pp. 293–96. Toman points out that, in contrast to the publication’s current prominence as a landmark of the Czech interwar avant-garde, it appears to have attracted almost no attention when it was published (p. 293). The present paragraph draws heavily on these two accounts.

16 Teige himself identified his contributions as ‘typophotos’, a term coined shortly before by László Moholy-Nagy; see Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 293. Teige discusses the typophoto in Karel Teige, ‘Modern Typography’, trans. by Alexandra Büchler, in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, ed. by Dluhosch and Švácha, pp. 94–105 (p. 99); Teige, ‘Typofoto’, in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 220–34 (p. 226).



FIG. I.I. 'H' from *Abeceda*. Private collection



FIG. I.2. 'G' from *Abeceda*. Private collection

letter 'H', except that the dramatic asymmetry (the right-hand bar is roughly four times as tall as the left) makes it simultaneously legible as abstract framing lines of a sort that Teige utilized extensively in his book designs (see Fig. I.3). Finally, neither Mayerová's pose nor Teige's typophoto shows any direct illustrative connection to Nezval's poem — they refer to the *letter* 'H' more than to the *poem* 'H' — and indeed Nezval's poem itself evinces only the flimsiest of connections to the letter (in the ungrammatical capitalization of the word *hudba* [music]):

We breath out and then we gasp
The clown tumbles The music [*Hudba*] stops on cue
In a corner we only hear the jester clap
Wonderful — I am the audience too!¹⁷

The interactions in the poem/setting 'G' (Fig. I.2) are rather different. Here Mayerová's pose would be difficult if not impossible to associate with the letter G without knowing the context of the poem. By contrast, Teige's typophoto is immediately legible as a minuscule 'g' — it is in fact one of the most literal renderings in the entire collection. Yet when Mayerová's pose and Teige's typophoto are read together, a surprising image appears quite clearly: she looks as if she is slinging a cowboy's lasso above her head. This is the opening image of Nezval's poem:

With g I'm sure we'll all agree
come thoughts of the lasso and saddle
Over the pampas the cowboys roam free
While I eat sirloin from Argentine cattle¹⁸

So here the function of the setting as illustration of the poem is foregrounded, whereas in 'H' the setting functioned more as illustration of the letter itself, with the poem remaining largely isolated within the whole. The referential relations and illustrative functions among the different elements are in each case unique.

This highlights a major difference in how the poems/settings of *Abeceda* function from Teige's original conception of the picture-poem proper. *Abeceda* most certainly enacts a form of medial holism whereby word and image work together, but the elements remain distinct. The act of reading and the act of visual perception function side by side rather than simultaneously: they are connected, so to speak, by the conjunction 'and'. In 'Malířství a poezie', by contrast, Teige had described the picture-poem in more radical terms, expressed by the fact that the hyphen in the picture-poem (*obrazová-báseň*) replaced the implied 'and' of *Abeceda* as the sign of a more intimate connection. He wrote: 'The poem [*báseň*] reads like a modern image [*obraz*]. The modern image reads like a poem'.¹⁹ Here Teige emphasizes not the additive juxtaposition of discrete creative acts, but the simultaneity of acts of *perception* required by a picture-poem: a form of 'reading' in which the verbal and the visual practice cannot be distinguished. This goal of a form of perception, in which the Linguistic and Pictorial Turns have mingled and each left their trace,

17 Vítězslav Nezval, *Alphabet*, trans. by Jindřich Toman and Matthew S. Witkovsky (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 2001), p. 26.

18 Ibid, p. 24.

19 Teige, 'Malířství a poezie', p. 495.



FIG. I.3. Teige, cover design for Konstantin Biebl, *Zlom* (1928). Private collection

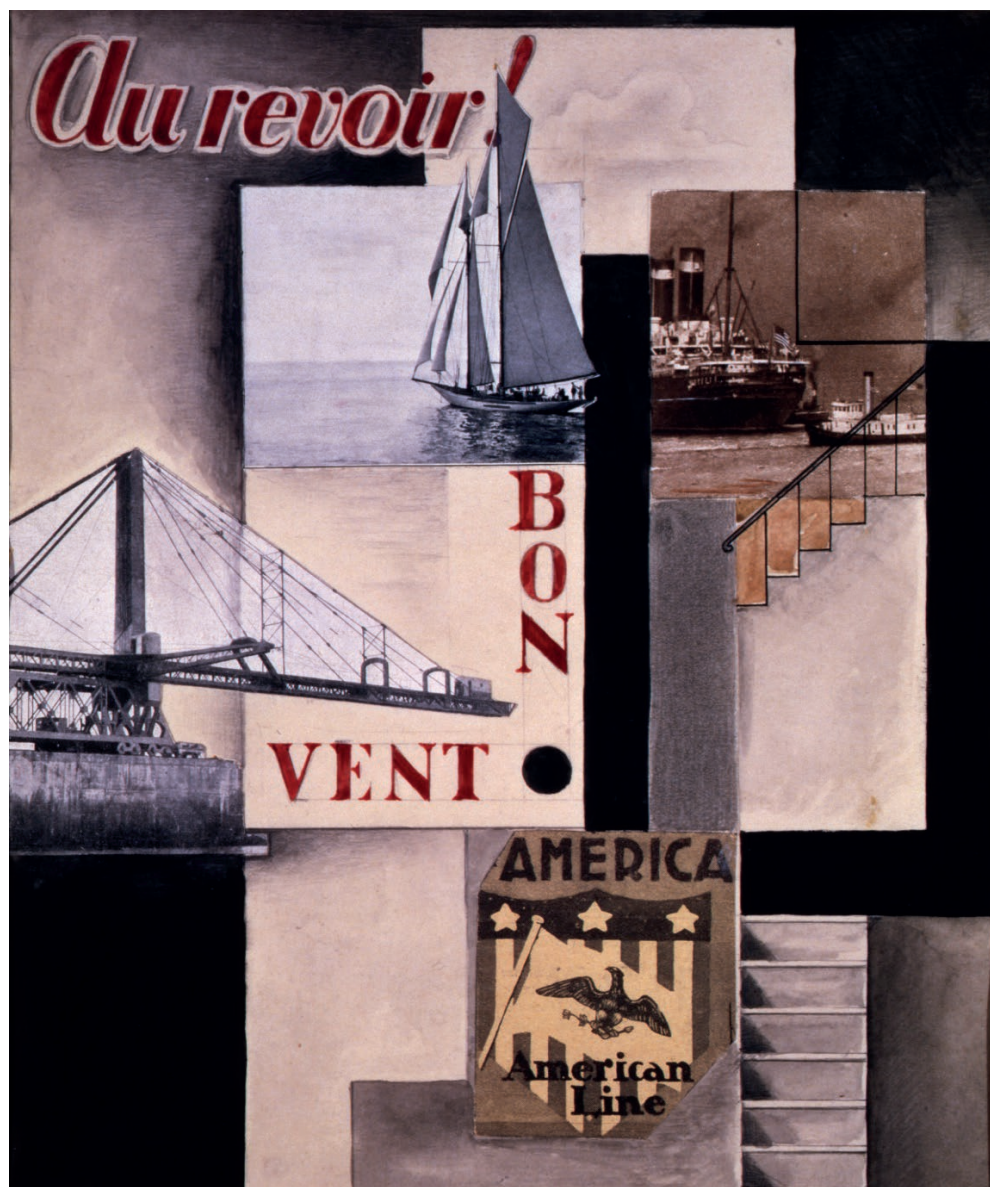


FIG. I.4. Teige, *Odjezd na Kytheru* [Departure for Cythera] (1923–24).
Prague City Gallery



FIG. 1.5. Teige, *Pozdrav z cesty* [Greetings from my Journey] (1923).
Prague City Gallery

is the most significant feature of Teige's conception of the picture poem. What might such an integrated act of visual-verbal reading look like in practice? The following section will attempt such a reading of one of the best-known of Teige's picture-poems, titled *Pozdrav z cesty* [Greetings from my Journey] (Fig. I.5). I will argue that the curious, simultaneously visual-verbal reading process Teige claims for the picture-poem is not simply called for but is also analysed in *Pozdrav z cesty*. Teige's picture-poem is *about* the very form of simultaneous perception it aims to bring forth.

Picture-Poem: Narrative Simultaneity

Since at least the *Odyssey*, the journey has served as a fundamental model for sequential narration: one event follows another, develops a story, and leads towards a destination, towards home, towards conclusion. The sequential or episodic nature of the individual events that make up the story give the notion of the journey a fundamentally temporal nature: a journey is as much about the passage of time as about movement through space. Thinking about narration through the image of the journey, however, draws attention to temporality in another sense as well. Time passes not only between individual episodes along the journey, but also through the temporal gap between the events themselves and the reporting or relating of those events. How do we report the events of our journey? *Pozdrav z cesty* presumes the medium of the post, the postcard, the letter. We travel; things happen; we write back home; and our account is then read. The unavoidable postage time, the physical distance the missive must travel, embodies the temporal lag inhabiting all narrative representation. Or rather, it makes explicit what narration so often tries to ignore: there can be no true present tense in the representation of events. A letter from someone away on a journey in one sense connects people who are physically separated, and thus transcends distance; but opening the envelope also, inevitably, releases temporality in the form of vague concern whether things *are still* alright, whether the period intervening since posting of the letter has not brought any mishap.

These two forms of narrative temporality — sequentiality and *representation* — roughly distinguish what might be termed a classical from a modernist frame of inquiry. Speculating on the fundamental nature of different artistic media in the eighteenth century, Gotthold Lessing had associated the temporal extension of progressive narration with 'Poetry', designating literature more generally, and contrasted this with the spatial extension characterizing 'Painting', or graphic arts more generally. A century and a half later, however, Teige was less interested in stipulating a typology of aesthetic forms or media (poetry versus painting) and more with articulating the impulse towards *immediacy* in perception. For Teige, 'immediacy' constituted a basic and essential drive within avant-garde production of any sort whatsoever: immediacy was the mark of the modern age, of aesthetic efficacy, and we have seen how this criterion drove his enthusiasm for mass culture. Teige's picture-poems — the neologism already indicates the urge to confute Lessing's category distinctions — attempt to enact a form of narrative immediacy.

In 1923–24 Teige inaugurated the genre of the picture-poem with two images of travel: *Pozdrav z cesty* and *Odjezd na Kytheru* [Departure for Cythera] (Fig. 1.4). *Pozdrav z cesty* was likely first exhibited in Devětsil's 'Bazaar of Modern Art' in late 1923, an exhibition that was intended to arouse indignant outrage and succeeded.²⁰ Such a form of exhibition would seem to go against Teige's injunctions against traditional forms of display for the picture-poem: they were supposed to be circulated in books and through technological reproduction, not hung on walls. But any accusation of hypocrisy needs to be tempered by the understanding that in all likelihood such mode of presentation at the Bazaar of Modern Art was decidedly tongue-in-cheek. A great many of the objects displayed at the 'Bazaar' were provocatively mocking, in the spirit of Dada and Duchamp: visitors were greeted at the entrance by a framed mirror with the caption 'Your portrait, dear spectator', and then were invited to admire a tailor's dummy, ball bearings, and a range of architectural plans and artworks calculated to provoke.²¹ In any event, *Pozdrav z cesty* and *Odjezd na Kytheru* were subsequently published together as a double-page spread in the journal *Veraikon* (Figs 1.6 and 1.7), and at least partly for that reason these two picture-poems have come to be regarded as forming a unit.

The double existence of these images as 'originals' (in full colour and of a size suitable for exhibit in gallery exhibitions) and as mechanical reproductions calls for comment. One can imagine that when displayed at the Bazaar of Modern Art the picture-poems subtly mocked their own pretension to the status of aesthetic object. This seems an intended effect of their construction: while the overall composition is carefully organized, the rough-edged nature of the individual elements, the jarring combination of found objects with hand-painted elements, would likely have given most viewers the impression that they were viewing not a finished work but merely a rough sketch — a storyboard, as it were, for a product that was due to be 'cleaned up' later. (This stands in contrast to many of the Dada or even Cubist precedents for Teige's picture-poems, precedents in which the jarring, cacophonous assemblage of rough elements also provokes the viewer but precisely because one intuitively understands this rough state to be the *final* state.) Teige's picture-poems, through the clarity of the overall design, the continual suggestion of symmetries, the painstaking reproduction of printed typeface in hand-painted letters, makes us want to believe that a clean version is forthcoming, and a more sophisticated viewer at the time might very well have anticipated that such clean version would take the form not of an individual 'original' object, but rather of a graphic intended for mechanical reproduction in a journal or as a book cover. Which is precisely what

20 See Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 94.

21 See Jindřich Toman, 'Dada Well Constructed: Karel Teige's Early Rationalism', in *Umění*, 43.1–2 (1995), 29–33 (pp. 29–30). The debt this 'Bazaar of modernist art' owes to the 'Dada Fair' of 1920, or the genre of picture-poem to Dadaist photomontage, is both evident and unspoken. The Prague performances that formed part of the 'Dada tour' of 1920, which Richard Huelsenbeck described in self-aggrandizing language as a great and scandalous victory, went unmentioned upon by Teige — a fact remarkable not only because of Teige's otherwise obsessive compulsion to report and analyse every manifestation of avant-garde activity but also because the recently formed Devětsil group was engaged in various undertakings for which Dada had clearly set a precedent. As we have seen, Teige's attitude towards Dada in the early 1920s was highly ambivalent.



K. Teige: *Odjezd na Kytheru*. 1924.
(Obrazová báseň.)

předmětů, vzájemně se doplňujících a vyvažujících, Fernand Léger přejímá tvary i řád stroje. Geometrická skladba obrazu oživována tu a tam doteky syrové životní reality. Metoda induktivní. Poesie náznaku, šifry, minima.

Prošedše cestou od *kubismu*, v němž zrodila se moderní forma a moderní smysl pro čistou výtvarnost, osvobozenou od literatury, až k *neokubismu*, *suprematismu* a *neoplasticismu*, a jsoouce zároveň vrstevníky strojové doby elektrického století, které nám poskytlo nové tvary, okouzluující moderně vychovaný zrak a bezčetná vzrušení, dojmající intenzivně naši sensibilitu, jsoouce vrstevníky moderní krásy, široce překračující meze tak zv. umění, cítíme, že nás tabulový obraz v mezích své konvence, třeba nejrevolučněji pozměněný, již neuspokojuje.

*

Naši obrazovou žízeň a potřebu výtvarného požitku sytí obrázkové magaziny, zejména angloamerické; při-

být problémem obrazovým, nýbrž architektonickým. Lissitzký koncipuje jakési metamechanické konstrukce a prounové prostory. Malevič likviduje malířství. Rodčenko přechází ke konstruktivní práci. – Fotomontážní obrazy (Popová, Citroen, Rodčenko, Kozincová).

Ve Francii od kulminačního bodu abstrakce nastoupena cesta opačná, cesta konkretisace. Cézanne udělal z láhve válec, aby láhev zdeformována a zgeometrisována, vyhověla obrazové komposici. Juan Gris zrobí z válce, daného obrazovou strojbcu láhev, aby obdržel kontakt s realitou. Ozenfant a Jeanneret skládají obrazy z tvarů standartních

stavy se stěžní, automobilové závody, biomechanika fotbalu a obrázkový prospekt všech pěti dílů světa. Těmito reportážními snímky dospívá fotografické umění šíře a velikosti, kterou historikové přiznávají jen starým mistrům. Plakát je moderní a efemérní freskou, velkolepým uměním agitačním. Má extensitu a intenzitu důstojnou své doby, moderní pathos, exaktní rafinovanost, srozumitelnost a synoptickou zřetelnost. Plakáty Medrana jsou básní uprostřed pařížské ulice. U kubistů byla písmena v obrazech dekorací, zde jsou slovem v plném smyslu, nikoliv slovem mluveným, ale čteným (optickým).



K. Teige: Pozdrav z cesty. 1923.

Impresionismus nezmocnil se světla a futurismus pohybu tak, jako se to zdařilo světelné reklamě a kinematografii. Japonský prapor, červený disk uprostřed bílého obdélníkového pole, je nejharmoničtější moderní komposicí. Nejčistší bezpředmětné malířství, nejlogičtější důsledek kubismu. Má s životní skutečností plný kontakt, jimž není naturalistický otisk. Na žerdi korábu znamená Japonsko, přenesen do umělecké výstavy a zavěšen v rámu na zeď, stal by se, přes svou dokonalou komposici, horentním nesmyslem. Jest příliš svébytnou skutečností, než aby mohl být považován za umělecký průmysl. Totéž platí o semaforech a mezinárodních znameních dopravních:

V těchto výtvarných skutečnostech nalézá doba lépe svůj výraz, než v pokusech uměleckých malířů. Jsou optickou řečí, znamením. Dnes není jen mluvené a spisovné řeči: existuje vlajková řeč, Morseova abeceda, zkratky, jargon žurnalistiky.

*

happened — sort of. For the versions of the picture-poems published in *Veraikon* were not cleaned-up versions adapted to the conditions of printed graphics. Rather, the journal reproduced *precisely the same images* — and in a manner, moreover, that made them appear even more provisional, more unsuitable, more awkward, and less easy to digest, for they were reproduced not only in black and white but also in a tiny format stuck in the upper corner of a page filled with text. If viewers at the Bazaar, therefore, were likely to have felt that they were seeing a preliminary version of an image that would appear more properly in a later printed form, readers of *Veraikon* may well have felt they were looking at an irresponsibly poor reproduction of an image that should properly be seen 'in the original'. This ambiguity, this double awkwardness, I would suggest, is intentional. (That Teige, who at the time was writing important texts on functionalist typography, used hand-painted lettering in a printed image, would appear to indicate as much.) These picture-poems inhabit a liminal space or grey zone between exhibited original and technological reproduction, always somehow referring to the mode in which the viewer is *not* seeing the image. They are, in short, images on a journey — always somewhere away from us, never present, simply postcards sent back home while the 'real' image continues its adventure elsewhere and without us.²²

The shared theme of travel is another reason these two images belong together. Travel, especially sea travel, had already emerged as a favoured theme within Devětsil; we have seen that it connected excitement about exotic locales and the discovery of the wider world, as well as engagement with the impressive machinery of modern transportation and infrastructure: loading docks, aeroplanes, and in particular ocean liners, were already functioning as a major inspiration for modernist architects internationally and featured prominently in the 1922 Devětsil anthology *Život II*. The theme of travel thus hinted at experiences in which one lost oneself and at discoveries through which one found oneself.

Many commentators have noted how these two picture-poems reflect this thematic cluster, but few have reflected on the relation of this travel theme to questions of temporality and narrative immediacy. In *Odjezd na Kytheru* these questions emerge in the very title: a *departure* is a specific moment, a snapshot; yet the images of the sailboat and the ocean liner pulling away, and the contrast with the enormous crane that they leave behind, inevitably gesture towards an extended journey that has only just begun. There is evidence that this tension between snapshot and temporally extended narrative particularly concerned Teige: he later glossed this image as presenting a 'small lyrical film' and described the movements one should perceive among the elements unfolding in temporal succession: the turning of the crane, the movement of the departing boats, the calls 'Au revoir!' from the well-wishers.²³ From this perspective *Odjezd na Kytheru* is as much about the tension between the precise moment of departure and the temporally extended journey we must imagine, as it is about the exoticizing theme of travel so popular among members of Devětsil.

22 Postcards were in fact one of the other genres for which major claims were made for the picture-poem; see Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 89.

23 See Levinger, *Constructivism in Central Europe*, p. 253; and Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print*, p. 94.

This tension between immediate moment and narrative extension is even more prominent in *Pozdrav z cesty*. If *Odjezd na Kytheru* presents us with a single moment containing the seeds of the full journey, *Pozdrav z cesty* gives us the full journey presented in a single moment. Here the itinerary only hinted at in *Odjezd na Kytheru* is shown in full, mapped out through a red line. A comparable structure of 'both/and' or 'neither/nor' which we saw in relation to the presentation of these picture-poems — both original and reproduction, neither exhibition object nor book image — orders the very imagery of *Pozdrav z cesty*, exacerbating the tension between immediate moment and narrative extension. The composition contains prominent doublings, suggesting symmetries that, however, are never exact. The red disk on the flag at the top is echoed in the wax seal of the (apparently unopened) envelope; the cancellations on the stamps are doubled, though slightly uneven; and those cancellation marks look as if they could have been imprinted by the tubes of the binoculars hovering oddly right above. The image as a whole is divided into three horizontal zones, each further subdivided into two sections; moreover, the upper and lower zones stand in a clear, counter-balancing relation. The viewer cannot avoid wondering what these subtle symmetries, these suggestive correspondences, might mean.

In fact, the composition of *Pozdrav z cesty* maps out for us not just someone else's journey but a mode of 'reading' the picture-poem as visual text. The red disk at the top of the image is the most prominent graphic element, a form of off-centre focal point, and invites us to begin our reading of the picture-poem in the upper left-hand corner, just as if we were reading a written text. The disk (in black or red) is one of Teige's most frequently used graphic elements during the 1920s; if one were to choose an emblem for Teige's Constructivism–Poetism period then surely it would be this disk (see, e.g., Fig. I.9). (*Disk* was also the title of one of the most important Devětsil journals; see Fig. I.8.) The disk unites the unadorned purity of Constructivism with the joyous perfection and simplicity of Poetism; it is both ball bearing and football; image of rational precision and embodiment of the irrational number π . Teige's disk is thus the very image of integration. In *Pozdrav z cesty* the most prominent red disk takes the form of the maritime signal flag. This is appropriate for the theme of sea-travel, of course, but also anticipates Teige's 1924 'Poetism' manifesto, where he wrote: 'the language of signal flags creates optical words. The same is true of international traffic signs. [...] The new poetic language is a form of heraldry: a language of signs. It works through standardized forms. (For example: Au revoir! Bon vent, bonne mer! Adieu! Green disk, passage open; red disk, passage closed)'.²⁴ Teige refers explicitly to the picture-poems under discussion here and thus allow us to connect the maritime flag in *Pozdrav z cesty* with Teige's ideal of an immediate language of signs, intuitively comprehensible and requiring no interpretive process. Elsewhere he referred to this language of immediacy not only as a form of heraldry but as a universal 'flag-language' (*vlažková řeč*), 'strictly technical and absolutely non-decorative'.²⁵ The red disk thus acts as cipher for

24 Karel Teige, 'Poetismus', in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 121–28 (p. 125).

25 Karel Teige, 'Slova, slova, slova', p. 100.



FIG. I.8. Teige, cover of *Disk*, 1 (1923). Private collection

immediacy, for ‘direct psychic sensation’ that skirts the detour of rational cognition, a form of cognition ‘without temporal extension [*v mimočasovém trvání*]’ that Teige identified in Bergson’s conception of intuition and applied to his own conception of ‘emancipated *poesie*’.²⁶ This intuitive cognition would replace the dirempted structure of the representative image with an immediate mode of communication, inhabiting a space between image and language, between the visual and the verbal, and would be drawn spontaneously to simple, graphically forceful, abstract forms. For all of the grandiosity of these claims, Teige saw such modern heraldry or flag-language emerging spontaneously and humbly out of the needs of the contemporary world through functional systems such as traffic signs and maritime signal flags. Such phenomena were for him undeniable proof of the integration of the Constructive and Poetist ideals.²⁷

All of this is packed in coded (or intuitive) form into the opening ‘optical word’ of *Pozdrav z cesty*, the red disk. Our act of reading then leads us to what appears to be a much more commonplace image, the photograph of a coastal town, a standard traveller’s snapshot. Reading this in conjuncture with the disk and its language of immediacy, however, frames the snapshot as document of an uncommonly strong personal experience: the excitement upon encountering a breath-taking view. The red disk functions as the abstract icon of a forceful impression, of an *experience* in which one momentarily loses oneself — but the abstract disk itself could stand for anything. What might that powerful experience have been? The subsequent optical word reveals that it was this sudden, beautiful view of a coastal town. It hardly matters which town, for this was surely an experience the traveller encountered many times.

Letting our eye then slide down the central diagonal — leading us towards the final ‘verse’ of the picture-poem — we see in the central field two representations of the journey as a whole. The star-filled night sky, perhaps recalling some lovely romantic evening but also suggesting a divine overview, or at least the sense of ‘cosmic belonging’ that so often envelopes the traveller on an exotic voyage, stands over and against the more earthly, human representation of the journey: the map indicating the route in red. These two holistic representations of the journey are impressive yet lack the graphic force of experience that makes such a journey special. The prominent punctuation of the red disk with which we began has been stretched out into a thin red thread; the route as a whole does not pack the punch of the individual experience.

Then, finally, we come to the final verse: the letter home. This is the greeting from the journey, the report and representation to others of the strong experiences

26 Karel Teige, ‘Od romantismu k dadaismu’, in Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 7–68 (pp. 45–46).

27 Elsewhere he compared this flag-language with the medium of the poster as simultaneously functional tool and aesthetic object: ‘The poster as public art is an art subjected to practical purposes. In just the same way practical purposes dictate the form and colour of semaphores, signal-lights, flags, and international traffic signs.’ The red disk appears once again when Teige adds: ‘The Japanese flag is the most harmonious modern composition. The purest form of non-objective painting, the most logical consequence of Cubism’; Karel Teige, ‘Naše základna a naše cesta,’ in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, I, 607–18 (p. 613).

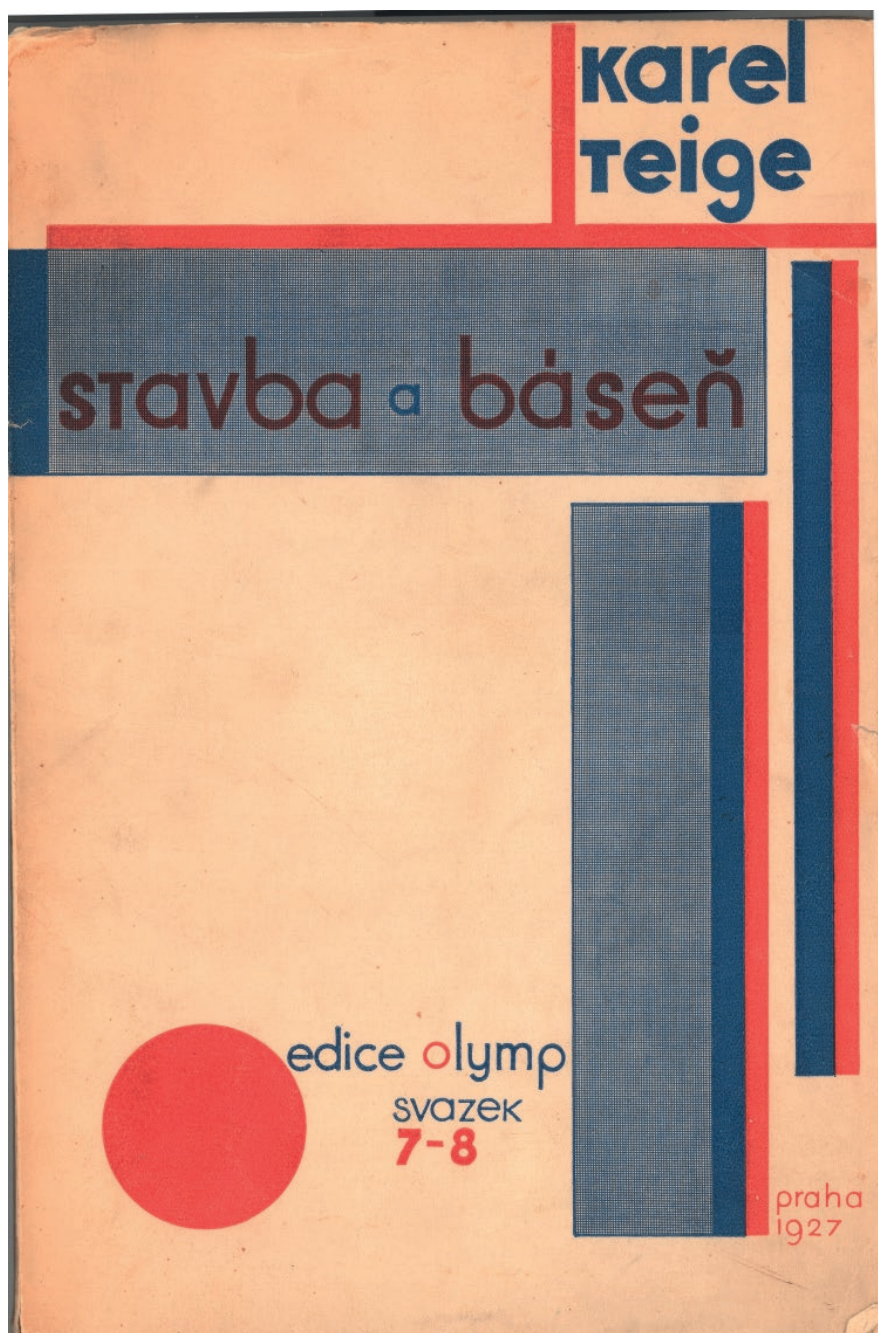


FIG. I.9. Teige's cover design for his 1927 book *Stavba a báseň* [Construction and Poem].
Private collection

the traveller encountered. Yet the red wax seal is a disappointing echo of the original red disk: sad and rumpled, and of shrunken dimensions as well. Indeed the symmetry between the binoculars and the cancelled stamps also taunts the viewer with the contrast between the original apperception — perhaps those are the very binoculars through which the traveller viewed the lovely coastal town? — and the account mailed home. Our main conciliation for the insufficiencies of second-hand experience is that the letter is addressed to Jaroslav Seifert, great poet and great friend.

It would, naturally, be misguided to read this picture-poem as if Teige were teasing his viewers that while he had a fabulous trip all we get is this lousy picture-poem. No — *Pozdrav z cesty* is itself a sort of journey upon which the viewer/reader embarks. We have our own immediate experience and then render our own account of what we have seen. The doublings in Teige’s image, therefore, represent the temporal lag associated with narrative representation as such. Teige depicts the start- and end-points of temporal lag simultaneously. Narrative delay cannot be overcome, of course, and Teige also makes clear that this journey is ongoing (the red line ends with an arrow, indicating further adventures beyond the frame, and thus not contained in the letter). But *Pozdrav z cesty* attempts the next best thing, by making narrative delay itself the subject of an image to be apprehended immediately. In doing so it reflects upon the impossibility of the simultaneous visual-verbal reading process of which it dreams.

PART III



Multiplicity in Unity:
The 1930s

CHAPTER 5



Functions of the Aesthetic: *Ars Una* and the Five Senses

In 1891, F. X. Šalda — a figure who dominated Czech cultural discourse on literary and visual arts in the decades to either side of 1900 and beyond, whom Teige identified as ‘the founder of Czech modernism’, and who is still widely regarded as the initiator of modern Czech literary criticism — published a short story.¹ The story was entitled ‘Analysis’ and featured a character who suffered from the ‘illness’ of compulsive analysis. As if himself undertaking to cure this peculiarly modern illness, Šalda published a few months later his first substantive work of cultural-aesthetic theory and titled it ‘Synthetism in the New Art’.² In this major study Šalda presented the culture of the nineteenth century as haunted by a fundamental rift: between the analytical function of rationality on the one hand, aiming to secure truth yet at the cost of circumscribing its area of operation to precisely delimited objects of investigation; and the synthetizing ambition of art on the other hand, aiming to encompass the world as a whole yet confronting seemingly unavoidable limits on what could be known. But Šalda understood the art of his time as uniquely positioned to overcome the limitations on knowledge that these analytical and synthesizing cognitive drives each contained within themselves.

Šalda was thus a major transmitter to Czech cultural discourse of the impulse that David Roberts has described as underlying the ideal of the ‘total work of art’: the ‘quest for synthesis’.³ Šalda’s particular version of this quest for synthesis, however,

1 Karel Teige, ‘Vůdce české moderny’ [Leaders of Czech Modernism, 1927], in *Výbor*, I, 243–49 (p. 248).

2 See F. X. Šalda, ‘Analýsa’, in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský, Václav Černý, Felix Vodička, Jiří Pistorius, et al., 23 vols (Prague: Melantrich, Československý spisovatel, Torst, and Institut pro studium literatury: 1948–2017), III, 193–207; and ‘Synthetism v novém umění’, X, 11–54. Šalda’s study is also significant in the Czech context for the strikingly wide, comparative range of sources it draws upon, from German Idealist philosophy to French Symbolism and Naturalism to Herbert Spencer’s conception of the Unknowable.

3 David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 1. On Šalda and synthesis, see Jiří Brabec, ‘Integrační tendence v Šaldově kritickém díle’, *Česká literatura*, 15.6 (1967), 453–68 (esp. pp. 461–67). On the synthetic ideal in Czech Symbolism, see Daniel Vojtěch, *Vášeň a ideál: Na křižovatkách moderny* (Prague: Academia, 2008), pp. 61–64; and Luboš Merhaut, ‘Hledání nové syntézy: Koncepční výkony českého literárního symbolismu’, in *Symbolizmus v kontextoch a súvislostiach*, ed. by Eva Maliti (Bratislava: ÚSL SAV, 1999), pp. 210–16. As Jan Wiendl has pointed out, Šalda’s synthetist ideal meant that he could at times show

united totalizing rhetoric with proto-Constructivist language, portraying the ideal of clear functional purpose as essential to identifying the cohesive and coherent historical identity underlying the culture of the present. He wrote:

Only today have we gradually worked through to the understanding that art has no meaning in and for itself, that it has its purpose [účel] and meaning in life itself [...]. Only our age attempts to understand what those happier ages in the past understood, what they lived and breathed: that style is cultural *unity*, and wherever the individual arts, puffed up and belligerent, pursue their own, isolated goals, the result can only be chaos. [...] [Artists of those happier ages] aimed the full strength and stress of their passionate souls towards *purpose* [účel] as the foundation of the artistic work, and they sanctified internal rhythm and logic as the greatest criteria for artistic creativity. From *derivative* forms, drawn from mere fantasy or convention, we are returning towards forms that are *fundamental, simple, and purposeful*; from delusion and trickery we are returning to honesty and integrity [jadrmosti], from false decoration to structure and skeleton, from the subordinate to what is central and primary.⁴

Through this linkage of holistic ideal with proto-functionalist rhetoric, Šalda bequeathed to Teige a *materialist* version of ‘the synthesizing, religious-redemptive, mystic or socially utopian intentions’ Roberts describes.⁵ We have seen how Teige was influenced by Šalda’s dictum that ‘the new beauty is above all the beauty of purpose, inner law, logic and structure’, but we have also seen the dead ends Teige encountered when he attempted to embody Šalda’s dictum through the dual programme of Constructivism and Poetism.⁶ Towards the end of the 1920s, therefore, Teige recalibrated his thinking and attempted to formulate his materialist holism in a new way. Rather than positing underlying unity within an explicitly dualist programme, Teige developed a conception of *Ars Una*, the product of a fundamental human creative drive, as the force unifying the manifold activities of the avant-garde. Echoing Šalda’s idea of ‘synthetism’ and ‘cultural unity’ from decades earlier, Teige’s *Ars Una* recast the implicit holism of the Constructivism–Poetism platform of the mid-1920s into the form of medial holism: the conviction that the various artistic media and disciplines — rather than pursuing ‘their own, isolated goals’ — represented different facets of a single, integrated avant-gardist project, and expressed a fundamental human creative drive. This recasting ultimately allowed Teige in the mid-1930s to treat Functionalism and Surrealism not as contradictory yet complementary principles, whose paradoxical relation required subtle and inventive articulation (as had been the case with the Constructivism–

sympathy towards both communism and fascism; see Jan Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači: K otázce sepečťí řádu umění a života v české poezii první poloviny 20. století* (Prague: Dauphin, 2007), p. 135.

4 F. X. Šalda, ‘Ethika dnešní obrody aplikovaného umění’ [The Ethics of the Contemporary Rebirth of the Applied Arts], in idem, *Boje o zítřek: Meditace a rapsodie, 1898–1904* (1905), in *Soubor děl*, I, 84–110 (pp. 112–13, emphases in original). It should be noted that Šalda’s proto-functionalist still admits of ‘authentic’ forms of ornament that are expressive of inner structure — a position that Teige did not follow.

5 Roberts, *The Total Work of Art*, p. 144.

6 F. X. Šalda, ‘Nová krása: Její geneze a charakter’ [The New Beauty: Its Genesis and Character], in Šalda, *Boje o zítřek*, pp. 84–110 (pp. 97–98).

Poetism dualism), but simply as equivalent entrance points to a shared *Ars Una*.

This conceptual recasting is the second major shift in Teige's thought, following on from the transition from Proletarian Art to the Constructivism–Poetism paradigm in 1922–23. As with that earlier transition, Teige did not elaborate much upon this shift explicitly, instead largely pursuing the new conceptual logic as if it were a natural extension of what had come before. But also as with that earlier shift, the change in thinking was accompanied by significant realignments in personal relations and group dynamics: the move away from Proletarian Art had required the break with Neumann and the honing of Devětil's identity as an ally of more sharply avant-gardist developments, and the move towards *Ars Una* reflected many of the tensions that would erupt in both the Generational Discussion that shook Devětil at the end of the 1920s as well as the Mundaneum polemic with Le Corbusier. This chapter will focus on two major outcomes that the *Ars Una* paradigm initiated: the first is a shift in how Teige conceived of functionalism, a shift from the model of *monofunctionalism* to that of *polyfunctionalism*; and the second is a shift from the ideal of the *integration of art and life* to that of *aesthetic autonomy* and the 'emancipation' of purified aesthetic forms and of the productive drive. Each of these shifts is drastic enough that they could easily feed the narratives of inconsistency and inner contradiction many of Teige's critics have levelled at his thought (narratives that certainly contain a degree of validity). But the shifts appear less jarring when contextualized through one of the other most important developments in Czechoslovak aesthetic theory in the 1930s: Jan Mukařovský's Structuralist aesthetics. If Šalda was the main domestic inspirational force for Teige during much of the 1920s, Mukařovský (1891–1975) was his intellectual ally for much of the 1930s. For the most part Teige and Mukařovský did not explicitly present their theories as interrelated, but the mutually reinforcing influences between their thinking were direct and personal, and it is impossible to understand the full implications of Teige's notion of *Ars Una* without some account of Mukařovský's notion of the aesthetic function.

One Art, Five Senses: The Turn to Polyfunctionalism

The emergence of *Ars Una* as a controlling concept is best observed in one of Teige's most significant theoretical texts from the end of the 1920s: 'Poesie pro pět smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu' [*Poesie for the Five Senses, or the Second Manifesto of Poetism*]. Teige often recycled and reworked material in different formats for different outlets (including, confusingly, titles), so the rather convoluted bibliographic context here calls for some explication. 'Poesie pro pět smyslů' forms the conclusory chapter of Teige's book *Svět, který voní* [*The Sweetly Scented World*, 1931], a book that constitutes one of the most fascinating theoretical documents of the interwar central European avant-garde. In that conclusory chapter Teige combined in slightly modified form two texts he had earlier published as free-standing articles, 'Manifest poetismu' [*Manifesto of Poetism*, 1928] and 'Báseň,

svět, člověk' [Poem, World, Human Being, 1930].⁷ *Svět, který voní*, in turn, is only one volume of a 'diptych' entitled *O humoru, clownech, and dadaistech* [On Humour, Clowns, and Dadaists], of which the first volume was Teige's book *Svět, který se směje* [The Laughing World, 1928]. Teige characterized this diptych as the gradual working out and development of ideas dating back to 1924, and the two volumes collect, order, and partially revise texts that were published in scattered outlets over the mid- to later 1920s, thus documenting a gradual change in Teige's thinking over a period of six years.⁸ The cycle shows a shift in attention from Dada (which Teige regarded as progressive in its humour and 'felicitology' but regressive in its nihilism) towards Surrealism (which Teige regarded as regressive in its early 'mysticist' phase but increasingly progressive as it solidified its Marxist commitment). This mounting interest in Surrealism notwithstanding, even the conclusory chapter of the entire diptych, 'Poesie pro pět smyslů', remains firmly committed to the paradigm of Poetism in its synthetic dualism with Constructivism. Nowhere is this clearer than in Teige's summarizing comment in the final pages of the book: 'Therefore: Poetism as the overcoming of the antagonism between poem and world, a new synthesis of poem and world, a synthesis of construction and poem [*stavby a básně*].'⁹ But the route towards Teige's future conciliation with Surrealism is also clearly visible, in particular in the linkage of Poetism with libidinal drives and the concomitant interest in Freudian psychoanalysis. (One commentator has even claimed that 'for a while, Freud became as important to [Teige and Nezval] as Marx'.)¹⁰ Indeed, the second part of 'Poesie pro pět smyslů' had originally been published in *Zvěrokruh* [Zodiac, 1930], a quasi-Surrealist publication that Nezval had edited and that (in its second issue, also 1930) contained the Czech translation of Breton's Second Surrealist Manifesto. And in the Afterword to *Svět, který voní* (dated January 1931) Teige noted a certain alliance between the two approaches: 'Despite the deep differences that

7 These individual articles are contained, respectively, in *Výbor*, 1, 323–59 and 487–500. In the discussion that follows I will give page references both to the revised version in *Svět, který voní* and to the earlier versions in *Výbor*.

8 In the Afterword to *Svět, který se směje* Teige pointed out that the title of the diptych (and part of the contents of that first volume) originates from an article he published in 1924, linking the origins of this cycle firmly to the period of the 1924 manifesto 'Poetism', whose implications it elaborates and develops; see Karel Teige, *Svět, který se směje* (Prague: Odeon, 1928), p. 90; and the 1924 article, Karel Teige, 'O humoru, klaunech, a dadaistech', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 571–86. Muddying the waters yet further is that in 1925 Teige published an article that also bore the title 'Poesie pro pět smyslů: Z knihy O humoru, clownech [*sic*], a dadaistech' [*Poesie for the Five Senses: From the book On Humour, Clowns, and Dadaists*], some of which fed into the later 'Manifest poetismu' but which should not be confused with the book chapter 'Poesie pro pět smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu' in *Svět, který voní*. See Karel Teige, 'Poezie pro pět smyslů', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 11, 191–96; originally published in *Pásmo*, 2.2 (1925), 23–24, with the subtitle and with *poesie* spelled with an 's'.

9 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 236. *Stavba a básně* [Building (or more broadly, 'construction') and Poem] was the title of Teige's major collection of theoretical statements from the early to mid-1920s, published in 1927 (see Fig. 1.9).

10 Karel Šrp, 'Karel Teige During the Thirties: Projecting Dialectics', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 256–91 (p. 261).

remain between Poetism and Surrealism, these two approaches share a fate: they are summarily and comprehensively condemned by pseudointellectual revolutionaries and revolutionary pseudointellectuals as spiritualist games, as bourgeois pastimes, as blossoms of decadence [...].¹¹ So 'Poesie pro pět smyslů' provides a long-exposure picture of Teige's thought in transition: with one foot it remains on the ground of the Constructivism–Poetism dualism of the 1920s, with the other it steps towards the new territory that Surrealism and Functionalism opened for him in the 1930s.

'Poesie pro pět smyslů' presents a developmental account of art and its relation to the notion of function. Teige writes:

The history of the human spirit, illuminated through psychoanalytic research, has shown how human affective needs were originally intertwined with material and utilitarian needs, and how the satisfaction of the latter simultaneously brought the satisfaction of the former. Aesthetic activity first inclines towards utilitarian functions and serves practical life (cave paintings, medieval artisanal arts, folklore) and later becomes independent.¹²

Teige describes the development away from this originary state as the increasing separation of aesthetic activity from such utilitarian needs and functions, and as a centuries-long 'emancipatory struggle, a struggle for the freedom and independence of non-utilitarian, aesthetic values'.¹³ He states as a fundamental principle of contemporary aesthetic activity that it 'demand first and foremost the absolute purity of *poesie* and not allow that it be applied to any extra-aesthetic purposes', and that it instead pursue a function and purpose of its own: an *aesthetic* function, which aims 'not at rational comprehensibility but rather at maximal emotional effect'.¹⁴ By contrast, for example, in the medieval period painting had served a didactic function and stood under 'the strict constraints of church doctrine', which required not only that art must 'transmit the literary content of [hagiographic] legends' and Biblical stories, but also that use of colour and composition follow set regulations (the colour of the Virgin Mary's cloak, for example, must always be blue). As aesthetic activity emancipated itself from such utilitarian functions and regulatory restrictions, art both shed its role as communicator of specific discursive content, doctrine, or propaganda and gained the freedom to use colour and composition as best befitted the emotional intensity the artist wished to convey. Thus when in a seventeenth-century Dutch still life the composition required a field of dark red the artist placed, say, a beetroot, and so on, demonstrating that, while still remaining faithful to a realistically conceived depiction of the outer world, the actual content being depicted was becoming indifferent, chosen not for itself but for its particular optical qualities and emotional valence. In Teige's account Romanticism (and then especially the lyric poetry of Baudelaire) played a key role in this development

11 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 239.

12 Ibid, pp. 204–05; *Výbor*, I, 339. See also Karel Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu' [Towards a Theory of Constructivism, 1928], in *Výbor*, I, 360–70 (361–62).

13 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 205; *Výbor*, I, 340.

14 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 203; *Výbor*, I, 338. Teige does not explicitly use the term 'aesthetic function', though it is implicit in his conception of *poesie* emancipated from all extra-aesthetic purposes.

because it ‘liberates form and returns *poesie* to its natural born, specific function’.¹⁵ The development of both visual and verbal art into the twentieth century showed the ever deepening commitment to such purely formal, emotional and, as Teige described them, ‘non-literary’ criteria (that is, not communicating through *ratio*), to the point where in Cubism the connection to a depiction of external reality snaps entirely.¹⁶

Underlying this developmental scheme was the shift from a monofunctional to a polyfunctional conception of aesthetic production. Teige did not himself use this terminology — it was Mukařovský who developed the mono-/polyfunctional distinction a few years later — but it is implicit in Teige’s notion of an ‘emancipation’ of the emotional or aesthetic function of art away from the rational and utilitarian functions with which art had so long been linked.¹⁷ The admission of a multiplicity of different functions, including an aesthetic function, in place of ‘functionality’ as such represents a fundamental shift from the functionalist rhetoric Teige had invoked from the early to the mid-1920s. Constructivism, recognizing only ‘functionality’ versus a ‘nonfunctionality’ conceived as superfluous ornament, had presupposed the fundamental integration of the utilitarian function and aesthetic efficacy: Teige had vehemently maintained that the latter was only achieved when the former was granted sole legitimacy. In 1925 he had written that ‘we cannot say that architecture begins where construction ends because in *the very moment when we achieve an all-round, functional perfection, we achieve beauty simultaneously and automatically*’.¹⁸ Even as late as the Mundaneum polemic (which was basically contemporaneous with ‘Manifest poetism’) Teige had berated Le Corbusier precisely for positing a ‘beauty function’ separate from, and to be ‘added on’ to, the ‘utility function’ in order to transform a mere building into true architecture. So what was going on with Teige’s admission of an emancipated aesthetic function? Was he being manifestly inconsistent, not to say unfair, in reproaching Le Corbusier for a conceptual position that Teige himself seemed to presume in other statements from roughly the same period?

Partially, yes. As discussed, this period is one of conceptual transition for Teige, and there is at times a degree of uneasy co-existence in his writings towards the end of the 1920s between positions that are not always easy to reconcile. But equally, no: Teige *does* have a point against Le Corbusier, even in the context of his increasing adoption of a polyfunctional position that admits independent utilitarian (or practical) and aesthetic functions. The difference between Le Corbusier’s model of a beauty function added on to the utility function and Teige’s model of the

15 Karel Teige, ‘Charles Baudelaire’ (1927), in *Výbor*, I, 168–219 (p. 168).

16 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 205–06; *Výbor*, I, 340–41.

17 See Irina Wutsdorff, ‘Aesthetic Function and Functionalism’, in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art, 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 71–83.

18 Karel Teige, ‘Constructivism and the Liquidation of “Art”’, in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 331–40 (p. 338); Teige, ‘Konstruktivismus a likvidace “umění”’, in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 129–43 (p. 140). Emphasis in original.

emancipation of the aesthetic function from the utilitarian lay in the distinction between mixing these functions together — Le Corbusier's 'addition' of beauty onto utility — as opposed to their increasing separateness: what Teige described as the 'purification' of these independent functions. He writes of the 'increasing tendency [tendence] towards the purification of *poesie*, the thoroughgoing elimination of foreign elements [*cizorodých prvků*] (morals, ideology, history, etc.).'¹⁹ So when an object served an aesthetic function (as in the case of, say, a Cubist painting) it must be purified of all non-aesthetic demands — it must not aim to communicate a story or political message (that is, 'literary criteria') but must focus solely on the evocation of emotional intensity. Equally, when an object served a utilitarian purpose then it must be subject solely to the dictates of the utilitarian function. This also applied to architecture, even though the result would be aesthetically effective due to the 'purity' of the utilitarian solution.²⁰

Teige's polyfunctionalism was thus indeed something different from Le Corbusier's model of 'utility plus beauty' functions. Each of Teige's emancipated functions strives towards purity, in other words, an *integral form* in which it is purely itself. This polyfunctional model thus remains in many ways consistent with Teige's anti-ornamental rhetoric from his monofunctionalist texts: each of the purified functions sheds everything external or foreign to its purified form. In the case of visual art, this meant that any narrative, communicative, and ultimately any depictive function was abandoned to allow emotional intensity to emerge in its purist possible form.²¹ In the case of literature, this likewise meant the culmination of a development towards emotion and affect that began with Romanticism, which 'released *poesie* from foreign elements and functions [*cizorodých prvků a funkcí*] and turned attention away from ideology and anecdote towards form'.²² A central aspect of such purified forms was that they bypassed the intellect and appealed directly and immediately to the emotions and the human sensorium. Teige goes on to celebrate '*Poesie* which is a form of music, as it speaks not to the intellect but to the senses. [...] *Poesie* that operates solely through sound and melody, *poesie* that is neither rhetoric nor tractatus but pure writing [...] *Poesie unshackled from literature*, liberated from rhetoric, logic, and everything that stands between the poet, *poesie*, and their pleasures'.²³

19 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 202; *Výbor*, I, 330. Emphasis in original.

20 See, e.g., Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu', p. 367. This text is particularly marked by the tension between Teige's monofunctionalist model, seeing 'beauty' only in the strict fulfilment of utilitarian purpose, and the polyfunctionalist model admitting a 'purified', independent aesthetic function.

21 Tomáš Jirsa writes that the 'anti-ornamental tendency in — not only — Czech avant-garde art is closely linked to an awareness of the crisis in imaging augured by Cubism, distrust of representation and designation typical of the beginnings of Modernism'; Tomáš Jirsa, 'Anti-Ornament', in *A Glossary*, ed. by Bílek, Vojvodík and Wiendl, pp. 99–111 (p. 102). Teige, to be sure, conceives this 'crisis in imaging' in positive terms as the 'emancipation' from extra-aesthetic demands.

22 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 13. This quotation is from the first chapter, 'Od romantismu k dadaismu', and is not contained in *Výbor*.

23 Ibid., pp. 23–24, emphasis in original. See also his paean to the 'pure verbal art' developed in poetry from Gautier through Rimbaud and Mallarmé to Marinetti: 'words, words, words, a verbal

The polyfunctionalist paradigm did not merely separate out the utilitarian from the aesthetic function: the aesthetic function further separated into different variants for different media. In search of their purified forms, different media followed distinct functional dynamics corresponding to their material and the specific human senses those media primarily addressed. Painting as an optical medium becomes, as we have seen, a search for pure colour composition. Poetry as a linguistic medium loses its 'utilitarian' function as communicative language and becomes an exploration of the materiality of the word, which Teige at times cast as its auditory aspect but at other times as its character as sign. He wrote:

Words delude. They are the garb of our illusions, seeming to designate reality. They are symbols certifying centuries-old superstitions, counterfeit banknotes of the gold standard of reality. We cannot know how and whether words correspond to truth and reality. The relation between an object and its name is inexact. We cannot know what lies underneath a word other than its canonized meaning. The nomenclatorial work of Adam in Paradise needs urgent scientific review. For the poet the word cannot be an image and replacement for a reality that would thereby lose colour, shape, essentiality; for the poet the word is material; it must become its own definite reality, as real as brick or marble. Its validity lies not in the problematic relation to reality but in its capacity to evoke associations, in its form, sound, movement, its capacity for play: for it is not the precise designation of an object but rather only its general casing, connecting the object with the most distant images. The new poetry will thus be its own reality, born from the misalliance of words.²⁴

By embracing *poesie*, therefore, literature becomes 'non-literary' in Teige's derogatory sense of the literary as mere communication of messages, narratives, or tendentious or didactic content. Music, similarly, becomes pure manipulation of sound and noise, the exploration of the emotional and psychological valences they evoke. But Teige goes far beyond the usual media identified as vehicles for artistic practice and identifies the potential for an olfactory art (creating 'symphonies of sweet scents' [*symfonie vůní*] that could summon the sort of powerful experiences lovers know so well), a tactile art (made from 'delicate, smooth, rough, hot or cold fabrics, from silk, velour, brushes, mildly electrified wires etc.' that would 'train our capacity for tactile emotion'), and not surprisingly an art of taste and gastronomy.²⁵ Art, in other words, involves exploration of the creative potential of a palette of materials that in principle is unlimited: anything that can be registered by any of the five senses comes into consideration.

The polyfunctionalist model thus took its place at the confluence of several of Teige's longstanding thematic priorities, linking them into a single conceptual stream and offering new ways to articulate their intermixing. The first was the *materiality* of artistic practice, the conviction that what the different artistic media do is explore the nature and possibilities of the material with which they work, whether that be

ballet without *sujet*, without anecdote, without *fabula* or tendentiousness'; Karel Teige, 'Poezie románu' (1926), in *Výbor*, I, 163–67 (p. 163).

²⁴ Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 94–95. This quotation is from the chapter 'Slova, slova, slova' [Words, Words, Words, originally 1926], Teige's most extensive discussion of the linguistic medium in the book. It is not contained in *Výbor*.

²⁵ Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 220–21; *Výbor*, I, 355–56.

colour, form, language, sound, scent, taste etc. This focus on materiality offered a way to recast artistic practice in a manner that brought it closer to political conviction, making it a form of engagement and potential transformation of the physical world. The second was the involvement of the full range of *human senses*, the conviction that the traditionally privileged senses of sight and hearing were not the only organs through which meaningful aesthetic experience could be transmitted. This focus on the five senses offered an anthropological perspective that cast art (with the usual caveat recalling Teige's critique of the traditional notion of what constitutes art) as exercise or expansion of the human sensorium, fostering an integrated, '*total human being*'.²⁶ And the third was *technology* and the new possibilities it opened for aesthetic experience. Teige breathlessly catalogued new genres and media that technological advancements would allow: 'pure' cinematography, bringing a 'photogenic *poesie*, the dynamic image, [...] a grandiose and chronospacial poem'; radiogenic *poesie*, 'as a new art of sound and music, as distant from literature and recitation as from music'; optophonetic *poesie*, in which beams of light projected onto a screen would be 'translated' by induction mechanisms into sound, allowing one to hear, so to speak, a square or a triangle and to 'combine chords of geometrical forms of light'; and so on. Exploiting the potential for aesthetic experience that new technologies offered, Poetism brought 'proposals for a new *poesie* that aims to make the universe poetic through all the means that contemporary science and industry provide'.²⁷

Many of these proposals now sound decidedly idealistic. In some cases these genres seem more like gimmicks than revolutionary new media, and it is difficult to avoid thinking that watching an optophonetic poem translating the play of geometric shapes into sound might quickly become dull, rather than being the exciting experience Teige posits. This point is not merely frivolous. Teige's excitement about these new possibilities rested on the claim that by cutting out the detour through the *ratio* they functioned as 'direct inductors of the emotions'.²⁸ They appealed *directly* to our sensory organs and such unmediated sensory appeal, Teige maintained, is not only immediate but irresistible. In this sense he invoked the same 'logic of spontaneity' as he had done since the early 1920s, when he defended mass culture — Chaplin films, adventure novels, and the like — as a progressive force (as we saw in Chapter Three). The logic back then drew support from the undeniable fact that mass culture was — it is indeed a tautology to note — widely popular. But one need only imagine a worker going to relax at the cinema after a gruelling shift at the factory and choosing between a Buster Keaton film or the latest optophonetic poem to see how far Teige's logic has led him. The criteria of immediacy and spontaneity have drifted away from the 'everyday world' and the humble joys of 'the people' into a realm of esoteric experiment.²⁹

26 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 232; *Výbor*, I, 494.

27 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 217–19; *Výbor*, I, 351–54. Rea Michalová points out that some of what Teige anticipates here would later be described as *musique concrète*, see Rea Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Daniel Morgan and Stephan von Pohl (Prague: KANT, 2018), p. 190.

28 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 203; *Výbor*, I, 338.

29 One of the major differences between the two volumes of *O humoru, clownech a dadaistech* is that *Svět, který se směje* maintains the focus on mass cultural forms that Teige emphasized in the early

A second critical point one might raise is that the proliferation of new technological media and the corresponding expansion of sensory experiences they initiated sounds very close to what Šalda had decried a quarter-century earlier when he stated that if ‘the individual arts, puffed up and belligerent, pursue their own, isolated goals, the result can only be chaos’. Has polyfunctionalism — embracing an enormous range of ‘purified’ forms of aesthetic production — not led away from the ideal of synthesis? How does polyfunctionalism square with the increasingly important postulate of *Ars Una*? Teige’s response was that while each of these media may answer to particular functional requirements in accordance with their material, all of them represent facets of the aesthetic function. And the focus of the aesthetic function is *poesie*: the word repeats like a regular drumbeat in all of the chapters of *Svět, který voní*; it reappears relentlessly as the endpoint and sole justification for aesthetic activity of any kind: visual, verbal, acoustic, dramatic. Teige described *Ars Una* as the intuition of underlying *correspondences* (the reference to Baudelaire is explicit) between different media:

The current epoch of our civilization represents a phase when the individual forms and fields of art have shed the purposes they served in the past, when aesthetic activity has unshackled itself from the utilitarian character of previous artisan crafts so as to live independently, and when these emancipated artistic fields draw closer and merge together so that it will no longer be possible to divide and distinguish them using the categories of previous aesthetic systems. This era when new scientific and technological capacities lead to new aesthetic fields and configurations has ignited the *notion of the correspondence and unity of artistic emotion*.³⁰

This shared foundation in immediate, affective, emotional power — the ‘*idea of correspondences* between the sensations of individual senses and the perception of hidden analogies among the individual fields of art’ — means that *poesie* for the five senses reveals a new *Ars Una*: Poetism realizes the ‘possibility of a holistic [*totalní*] *poesie* calling for the *active cooperation of all the senses*’ and ‘declares a new synthesis, absolute, universal *poesie* for all the senses, a new *Ars Una*, united and multifaceted’.³¹ Precisely the emancipation and ensuing purification of various fields of aesthetic activity revealed the common ground from which they all sprung.

The Laboratory of the World: The Turn to Aesthetic Autonomy

The gradual separation of functions and the ever greater emancipation of *poesie* and the aesthetic function was not the only historical tale that ‘*Poesie pro pět smyslů*’ had to tell. The other historical narrative structuring Teige’s account here involved *the end or decline of art* (*zánik umění*). More precisely, since he was aware that ‘the decline of art has been proclaimed many times’ from Hegel through Dada, Teige

1920s, while *Svět, který voní* turns attention more to ‘high’ modernism (Baudelaire, Symbolism, Cubism) and technologically experimental new forms.

30 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, pp. 208–09 (emphasis in original); *Výbor*, I, 343–44.

31 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 202 and 215 (emphases in original); *Výbor*, I, 349–50 (slightly different version).

presented what he considered a more historically and materially grounded narrative about the gradual 'extinction and progressive degeneration of the individual artistic disciplines', that is, of the traditional forms and media of art such as painting, sculpture, literature, and so on.³² We have seen that in the early and mid-1920s Teige felt that the dominant feature of art in the nineteenth century was its deepening separation from society as a whole: 'The parting of art from society and the public, beginning in the last century with the end of the *Empire* style that had emerged from the French Revolution, continued with ever accelerating pace over recent decades, and today is an undeniable fact. *Art for art's sake*, that slogan and goal from years back [...] has now become reality, and this reality is a curse.'³³ Cut off from 'life', the arts withered: 'The previous forms of art — painting, sculpture, dramatic and verbal art — are stored away for good next to obsolete systems of instruction, defunct philosophies, insalubrious morals, washed out metaphysics, mythologies and religions in the archives of history and the collections of museums, only to exist henceforth as objects of historical research and archaeological interest'.³⁴ The hiding away of traditional art in museums, galleries, ateliers and similar spaces was the tangible manifestation of art's autonomy, of its lack of any genuine connection with contemporary life.

Thus far Teige's account is fairly standard avant-gardist dogma: traditional art is execrated for its affiliation with lifeless history, stuffy museums, snobbish art galleries, and dusty archaeological collections. But Teige developed an increasingly nuanced view on the autonomy of art. Even in the mid-twenties he was aware that not all aesthetic autonomy was baleful. In 1924 he wrote:

The misunderstandings produced by the enormous isolating distance that social developments have placed between art and society gave rise to the seductive yet delusive slogan: 'art for art's sake'. *L'art pour l'art* represents a badly conceived autonomy of art. Art, after all, has no meaning in and of itself, it only has purpose and meaning in connection with life; and just as a machine is only a machine when it is doing work, so art is only art when it is performing its function.³⁵

If aesthetic autonomy can be 'badly conceived', that implies that it can also be properly conceived. While in the mid-1920s Teige was still mostly focused on the bad conception — on how 'art became an internal affair of ateliers'³⁶ — he was well aware that this situation was not merely the result of bourgeois artists allowing themselves to become corrupted by market forces or misguided by commodity

32 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 222; *Výbor*, I, 487. This theme of the 'systematic liquidation of previous artistic forms in order to inaugurate the reign of pure *poesie*, sparkling in countless forms, multifarious like fire and love', was announced as early as 1924: see Karel Teige, 'Poetismus', in *Výbor*, I, 121–28 (p. 126).

33 Karel Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra' [Art Today and Tomorrow, 1922], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, I, 365–81 (p. 366).

34 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 224; *Výbor*, I, 487–88.

35 Karel Teige, 'Moderní umění a společnost' [Modern Art and Society, 1924], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, I, 505–13 (p. 505).

36 Loc. cit.

fetishism. Those factors certainly existed, but aesthetic autonomy under capitalism was unavoidable even for genuinely talented and progressive artists. For the separation of art from society stemmed from the nature of capitalist society: on the one hand these social dynamics led the great majority of artists to passively accept corrupted, commodified ideals, but on the other they caused true artistic talent to actively recoil. Teige wrote: 'While this ideological and academic art, hatefully rebuking free modern creative work, grapples for prizes, recognition in competitions, and awards in salons, or for government subventions and donations from the bourgeoisie, the true and pure modern artists were forced by the circumstances to sever radically *art from the state and from society*, and they proclaimed their autonomy'.³⁷ This, presumably, was aesthetic autonomy properly conceived: a protest against the corrosive dynamics of bourgeois capitalist society and its commodification of art. Aesthetic autonomy was thus inherent in the structure of this society, not the result of the failure of individuals; strong artists embraced it as well as weak ones, albeit for different reasons.

Within a few years Teige was emphasizing such 'properly conceived' autonomy ever more forcefully. He described a dialectical shift from the debilitating aesthetic autonomy imposed by bourgeois capitalism, which had caused the traditional art forms to languish and wither due to their separation from and irrelevance to life and society, towards an aesthetic autonomy that progressive artists had carved out as a space for free artistic experiment. He wrote:

The gradual extinction of the old forms of art through their isolation from production processes and social life prepared the ground and opened up paths to entirely new forms and to the creation of a new synthesis of poem and world [*básně a světa*]. The evolution of artistic forms, which in the period of late capitalist industry were excluded from the process of production and thus ultimately from the world itself, took them to the edge, to an extreme, and to decline. In this condition of isolation from the world and from social life, however, the conditions were simultaneously created to overcome just that isolation through new and different forms. [...] One must admit that it is precisely in art — a field quite distant from productive and social life and as a result a field of greater freedom, less burdened by the concerns of the ruling class — that inklings, glimpses, hints appeared very early on of new forms and new social transformations, and that the 'community of artists', that 'aristocracy of the nerves', that republic of *déclassé* individuals, people *in extremis* [...] showed a range of points of contact with revolutionary social forces.³⁸

Certain forms of late nineteenth-century autonomous art, therefore, despite having no overt progressive political commitment, anticipated or contributed (perhaps indirectly, perhaps unknowingly) to new social transformations, which Teige, not surprisingly, implicitly understood as movement towards communism. This represents a further extension of his critique of tendentious art from the early 1920s: whereas earlier Teige had opposed tendentious art to the Poetist ideal of

37 Karel Teige, 'Doba a umění' [Art and the Age, 1923], in Teige, *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), pp. 24–52 (p. 38). Emphasis in original.

38 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 224; *Výbor*, 1, 488.

a non-utilitarian art fully integrated with 'life' and its everyday joys and humble manifestations, now he opposed it to an autonomous art ('properly conceived', of course) that carried out its adventurous experiments in splendid isolation from the surrounding society.

To a degree this new scheme constituted an admission that the necessary social transformations had not yet fully taken hold: progressive art must still imagine a future by studying what lies immanent yet insufficiently developed in the present.³⁹ The condition of autonomy had allowed the emergence of new artistic forms, but the reconnection with life had been pushed off into the future:

The isolation of art from life, from society, from production, gave rise to the elements of the new *poesie* and withered the old artistic forms. This isolation, which gave to art an *atelier- and laboratory-like purity* [*atelierovou a laboratorní čistotu*] by stripping it of any social or utilitarian function, which meant the complete loss of contact between art and people, crystallized a new *poesie* capable of realization, which can shine, live, and achieve victory only by regaining that contact. This will not happen by returning to the old conditions but by achieving a connection and integration [*splynutí*] with the world and society on a higher developmental level of poem and society [*básně a společnosti*].⁴⁰

Teige's appeal to an '*atelier- and laboratory-like purity*' stands in striking contrast to his earlier pejorative use of such images, and this passage makes clear how radical a shift his thinking underwent in the later 1920s. When compared to how stubbornly the scholarly literature has focused on the alleged contradictions and paradoxes of the Constructivism–Poetism dualism in the 1920s, it is striking that this later shift — which appears an even more fundamental contradiction, a complete reversal from the position of 'integration of art and life' to the embrace of aesthetic autonomy — has not received more attention. The shift meant that 'only by concentrating on its own functionality, that is, by focussing on its own particular internal laws, can art contribute in its own specific way to the far-reaching liberation of man; only as autonomous can art fulfil its emancipatory function'.⁴¹ Teige's monofunctionalist position of the early 1920s, which presented Poetism as *purposeless* and thus radically anti-utilitarian (Poetism 'is a signpost of a path that does not lead from anywhere to anywhere, but which revolves in a resplendent fragrant park'), shifted towards a polyfunctionalist position casting the aesthetic function as the abdication of any aim towards external utility while yet retaining the *form of purposiveness* — that is, towards something resembling the Kantian dictum of 'purposiveness without purpose' (*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*).⁴² The further Teige moved towards his eventual rapprochement with Surrealism, the more he emphasized this image of the

39 In many respects this represents the re-emergence of the notion of a 'fore-image' (*předobraz*) that Teige had described as early as 1921 (at a time when he was still committed to the ideal of *lidovost*). See Karel Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy' [Images and Fore-Images], in *Výbor*, 1, 25–32.

40 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 226; *Výbor*, 1, 489. Emphases in original.

41 Wutsdorff, 'Aesthetic Function and Functionalism', p. 74.

42 Karel Teige, 'Poetism', trans. by Ian Finlay, in *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourses*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023), pp. 149–54 (p. 151); Teige, 'Poetismus', p. 123.

'laboratory' of the aesthetic: a space of aesthetic autonomy where creative activity, emancipated from the fetters and deforming dynamics of a commodified world, could pursue its own purified forms.⁴³

To make sense of this shift requires looking once more at the notion of an independent aesthetic function: the 'laboratory' of aesthetic autonomy was the testing ground for the aesthetic function, the place where its particular dynamics and coordinates could be measured, developed, and perfected. On the level of rhetoric Teige attempted to balance out the isolation implicit in aesthetic autonomy precisely by casting it as a function, and thus in some way comparable in nature to the more practical or utilitarian functions familiar from Constructivism. Indeed in 'Poesie pro pět smyslů' he adopts at times a vocabulary that might be criticized as naively pseudo-scientific, for example when he declares that 'the methods of this *poesie* are corroborated through thoroughgoing laboratory work. The exacting results of physiology, optics, chemistry, acoustics, etc. have provided the foundation for a new theory of art'.⁴⁴ Here Teige's enthusiasm sounds nearly as breathless as had his listing of the new artistic media that modern technology made possible. More plausible, however, was his linkage of *poesie*, whose potential powers artists explored in their 'laboratories', with an emotional and physiological human drive (*pud*). The language of laboratories and the aesthetic function thus connected with Freudian terminology that was becoming ever more important to Teige's thinking in the late 1920s. Teige responded to the question of the meaning or function of art with 'the *hypothesis of a unified human productive drive*', and the ultimate source of this drive was for him clear:

If we acknowledge the unified creative drive of the human being/producer [*člověka-výrobce*], operating through its typical mode of function, we again find only *Ars Una* in which the activities of all the senses, body and spirit, hand and brain, merge into a higher synthesis. This creative drive [...] is a form of energy inhabiting the border region between the physical and spiritual, and the roots of this instinct are to be found in that fundamental, vital, creative drive par excellence, that is, the sexual drive.⁴⁵

Identifying a unified productive drive linking aesthetic or artistic creation with sexual excitation was not to be understood as a crude reduction of 'spiritual' activity to physical instinct: rather it identified a point of connection between spirit and instinct, allowing a totalized image of human activity that neither rejected the aesthetic as inessential nor stigmatized sexuality as base physicality. This conception of unified spirit and instinct was analogous to Teige's overriding images of synthesis between 'poem and world' (*báseň a svět*) or 'construction and poem' (*stavba a báseň*) during the Constructivism–Poetism period. But it also allowed a more precise

43 On the wider use of such rhetoric see Jindřich Toman, 'A Marvellous Chemical Laboratory ... and Its Deeper Meaning: Notes on Roman Jakobson and the Czech Avant-Garde Between the Two Wars', in *Language, Poetry, and Poetics: The Generation of the 1890s: Jakobson, Trubetskoy, Majakovskij*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska, Elżbieta Chodakowska, Hugh McLean, and Brent Vine (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987), pp. 313–46.

44 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 227; *Výbor*, I, 490.

45 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 228; *Výbor*, I, 490–91.

definition of the aesthetic function, which Teige claimed operated ‘*through a systematic, irradiating culture of the senses and sensibility to cultivate, harmonize, and socialize those vital human powers, which older societies had crippled, clamped and suppressed through their moralities, religions and economic conditions*’.⁴⁶ This formulation presented the aesthetic function not simply in negative terms — as what was left once one emancipated art from all utilitarian functions — but as a force bringing about a determinate positive effect: human happiness, harmony, and wholeness. The aesthetic function, therefore, performed several necessary tasks: first was the historically specific task to rectify the deformations that the repressive social and economic structures of high capitalism had imposed; and the second was a more fundamental, as it were timeless anthropological task, that is, to satisfy humanity’s ‘burning thirst for lyricism’.⁴⁷ This need to assuage the creative drive was no less basic than the sexual drive, and the aesthetic function answered that need. Even in the early 1920s, when his monofunctional model did not expressly admit of an independent aesthetic function, Teige would at times describe Poetism as a form of ‘spiritual hygiene’ and even wrote of ‘physiological’ or ‘instinctual’ purposes (*pudové účely*) that Poetism addressed.⁴⁸ The way that Teige’s later conception of the autonomous aesthetic function circled back from its autonomy to serve what were presented as necessary tasks or *practical* needs thus made explicit a tension that had long lain implicit in his attempts to reconcile the monofunctionalist ideal of practical purpose and the polyfunctionalist ideal of emancipation from purpose. Teige wavered between understanding the aesthetic in utilitarian terms as the semi-biologistic satiation of instinctual needs and restoration of anthropological ‘harmony’, and understanding the aesthetic as the Kantian ‘purposefulness without purpose’ that the notions of aesthetic autonomy and the aesthetic function presupposed. In short, Teige posited the identity of what, for Kant at least, were opposites — serving or not serving an external end — and he never fully worked through this tension. But another thinker close to Teige in the 1930s made this tension the central feature of his model of the aesthetic function.

46 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 229; *Výbor*, I, 491. Emphasis in original.

47 Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 227; *Výbor*, I, 490.

48 See, e.g., Teige, ‘Doba a umění’, pp. 45 and 47. The rhetoric of hygiene and instinct resonates to an uncomfortable degree with fascist *topoi*, though ultimately these led Teige in a very different direction, that is, Surrealism.

The Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions: Mukařovský's Structuralist Aesthetics

Jan Mukařovský is — together with the Russian linguist and literary scholar Roman Jakobson and the Russian linguist Nikolai Trubetskoy — perhaps the best-known figure from the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC), often referred to as the 'Prague School'. The PLC was established on 6 October 1926 by a small group of scholars led by the linguist Vilém Mathesius (who also established the Department of English Philology at Prague university), though it had existed in the form of irregular meetings of scholars for about a year and a half before that and indeed remained a fairly loose organization until its formal registration in 1930. Both Mukařovský and Jakobson were active members from early on, and both embody one of the prominent features of the PLC: attention to both general theory of linguistics or aesthetics and detailed analysis of individual works of literature, art, architecture, film, drama, and to a lesser extent music. Members of the PLC developed the conceptual models of 'system', semiotics and functionalism into a characteristic, if never definitively fixed, body of thought that has come to be known as 'Prague Structuralism'. Prague Structuralism, in turn, is often portrayed as a developmental outgrowth of the Russian Formalist School and an anticipation of both post-war French Structuralism and German reception theory. Such characterization by reference to earlier and later intellectual currents, however, does little to communicate the internal significance and international influence of the PLC in the interwar years. Fuller awareness of that significance has not been made easier by the degree to which many members of the PLC — Mukařovský prominently among them — articulated their theoretical claims through analysis of particular works from Czech and Slovak culture, works that remain widely unfamiliar.⁴⁹

In fact, one of those 'local' cultural orientation points that was most prominent for both Mukařovský and Jakobson was precisely the Czechoslovak avant-garde as practised by members of *Devětsil*. Underlying this situation were personal friendships. Jakobson, for example, became friends with Vítězslav Nezval and Jaroslav Seifert early on in his stay in Prague. In a 1950 letter to the Italian scholar of Czech literature Angelo Maria Ripellino he wrote:

I came to Prague in 1920 and made the acquaintance of Seifert in 1921. A little later, but still in the early twenties began my friendship with [Konstantin] Biebl and especially with Nezval. I brought to Czechoslovakia the first information

49 For some basic bibliography on the PLC see Chapter 1, notes 71 and 74. Before coming to Prague in 1920 Jakobson had been involved with the Moscow Linguistic circle and OPOJAZ in St Petersburg, and had close connections with Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde artists and writers such as Kazimir Malevich and Velimir Xlebnikov; see Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), Chapter 2. During the War Jakobson was at the École libre des hautes études in New York City, where he had direct influence on the emerging Structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, also teaching there at the time. On PLC influence on Hans Robert Jauss and reception theory, see Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

about Xlebnikov and Majakovskij. Even their names were completely unknown before I came. Often I spoke with the Devětsil people about the above-mentioned Russian poets and about the current problems of Russian poetry at that time. Some of these slogans influenced the 'poeticism' [Poetism] in birth, but the influence of modern Russian poetry as such was rather weak, much weaker than that of the French.⁵⁰

Jakobson occasionally published in Devětsil journals, most prominently an article in *Pásmo* where, dominating the front page, he joined on Devětsil's side in the polemic against S. K. Neumann and his ideal of agitational art and poetry (see Fig. 5.1).⁵¹ Nezval, for his part, became friends with Mukařovský as well, and opened his 1932 volume of poetry *Pět prstů* [Five Fingers] with an enthusiastic dedication to 'my dear friend, Jan Mukařovský'.⁵² Teige also belonged to this circle of friends (see Fig. 5.2). The relationships were intellectual as well as collegial, and gave rise to mutual inspiration: Karel Šrp has stated that 'Teige found personal companionship and theoretical inspiration in Mukařovský during the latter half of the thirties, although not entirely agreeing with all the tenets of his structuralism and semantics'; and Robert Kalivoda has stated that 'without doubt Teige in many respects directly inspired Mukařovský'.⁵³ Teige's engagement with the work of Prague Structuralists went back to the mid-1920s, however: see, for example, his reference (in a text originally published in 1926) to Roman Jakobson's distinction between communicative and poetic language.⁵⁴ Mukařovský wrote not only on figures and topics dear to Teige and Devětsil (such as Charlie Chaplin and film more generally) but also directly on the work of Devětsil authors such as Nezval and Vladislav Vančura and painters such as Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen.⁵⁵ In short, two of the most significant trends in interwar Prague culture, Devětsil and the PLC, were in close contact and felt themselves to be pursuing parallel aims.⁵⁶

50 Cited from Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language*, p. 219. See chapter 11 of Toman's study for fuller context.

51 Roman Jakobson, 'Konec básnického umprumáctví a živnostnictví', *Pásmo*, 13–14 (1925), 1–2.

52 Vítězslav Nezval, *Pět prstů* (Brno: B. Killian, 1932), p. 3. Nezval addresses Mukařovský with the informal form of 'you' (Ty).

53 Šrp, 'Karel Teige During the Thirties', p. 282; Robert Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost a marxismus* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970), p. 15.

54 Karel Teige, *Svět, který voní*, p. 102. See also the discussion in Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language*, pp. 224–28.

55 See, e.g., Jan Mukařovský, 'Dvě studie o Vítězslavu Nezvalovi', 'Dvě studie o Vladislavu Vančurovi', 'K noetice a poetice surrealismu v malířství', 'Toyen za války', and 'Jindřich Štyrský', in Jan Mukařovský, *Studie z estetiky*, ed. by Květoslav Chvatík (Prague: Odeon, 1966), pp. 269–85; 286–95; 309–11; 312–14; and 315–17; as well as 'Několik poznámek k novému románu Vl. Vančury' and 'Vančurovská prolegomena', in Jan Mukařovský, *Studie*, ed. by Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič, 2 vols (Brno: Host, 2007), 1, 481–89 and 503–53.

56 This parallel continued in unhappy form after the Communist takeover in February 1948: both the interwar avant-garde and Structuralism were swiftly banished from public and scholarly discourse. Mukařovský himself played a depressing role in this, as his 'gradual surrender to the [Communist] party dogma' (Jiří Veltruský, 'Jan Mukařovský's Structural Poetics and Esthetics', in *Poetics Today*, 2.1b (Winter, 1980–81), 117–57 (p. 119)) was accompanied by his formal denunciation of his own Structuralist work from the 1930s and '40s and was rewarded by his appointment as Rector of the Charles University from 1949 to 1953. Then in the mid-1960s a gradual rehabilitation of both



FIG. 5.2. Clockwise from top: Teige, Jakobson, Nezval. Private collection

As noted earlier, Teige himself did not explicitly use the terms monofunctionalism, polyfunctionalism, or even aesthetic function, though they were all implicit in his evolving conception of a *poesie* that had over time become ‘emancipated’ from all ‘extra-aesthetic functions’. Mukařovský, by contrast, made the exploration of the aesthetic function and its relation to other functions the central question of his Structuralist aesthetics. His primary aim was to depict the aesthetic function as an integral and important part of life rather than as an addendum, a luxury, or an ornament to the practical functions. He made this aim clear in the laconic opening sentence to one of his longest and most significant essays: ‘The aesthetic function has an important place in the life of individuals and of society as a whole’.⁵⁷ Pursuing this aim required that he conceive of the aesthetic function in a manner that captured its unique character without locking it into the pernicious model of autonomy. How could one define the aesthetic function in a way that was not merely privative, that is, not merely as something emancipated from all utilitarian functions and thus as something inevitably isolated from ‘real life’? And how might one legitimately identify and discuss operations of the aesthetic outside the confines of the autonomous work of art?

The first part of his answer lay in the adoption of the language of functions itself. Traditional aesthetics, Mukařovský argued, centred on the question of *the Beautiful*, and this inevitably became mired in metaphysical questions about the relation of the Beautiful to the Good, the True, and so on. Further, this metaphysical standpoint could only conceive ‘the aesthetic outside of art’ as the beauty of nature, and thus inevitably confronted the question how one was to evaluate artistic beauty in relation to natural beauty, forcing the adoption of one or another hierarchy between these two phenomena. Either one privileged natural over artistic beauty, in which case art could never be more than pale imitation of the natural world (a Platonic conception); or one privileged artistic over natural beauty, in which case art humanized and perfected the natural world (a Neoplatonic conception); or finally, one declared their complete equality, independence, and autonomy from each other. All three responses, however, presupposed ‘a sharp, rarely passable dividing line between nature and human creation, and especially between nature and art’.⁵⁸ Adopting the vocabulary of functions, however, shifted aesthetic inquiry from static metaphysical questions to questions of dynamics that were fundamentally anthropological in nature:

interwar legacies could be undertaken, and groundbreaking editions of both Teige’s work (*Výbor*, vol. 1) and Mukařovský’s (*Studie z estetiky*) appeared in 1966 with a degree of overlap in the editing teams (in particular Květoslav Chvatík). Both Chvatík and another of Teige’s editors, Robert Kalivoda, wrote studies in this period that drew explicitly on this parallel legacy; see Květoslav Chvatík, *Smysl moderního umění* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965) and *Strukturalismus a avantgarda* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970); and Robert Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost a marxismus* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970).

⁵⁷ Jan Mukařovský, ‘Estetická funkce, norma, a hodnota jako sociální fakty’ (1936), in Mukařovský, *Studie*, 1, 81–148 (p. 84).

⁵⁸ Jan Mukařovský, ‘The Place of the Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions’ (1942), in Jan Mukařovský, *Structure, Sign and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and trans. by John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 31–48 (p. 33). Czech original: ‘Místo estetické funkce mezi ostatními’, in Mukařovský, *Studie*, 1, 169–84 (p. 171).

Today we are not interested in studying whether the aesthetic clings to things, but in discovering to what extent it is present in human nature itself. We are not concerned with the aesthetic as a static property of things, but with the aesthetic as an energetic component of human activity. For this reason we are not interested in the relation of the aesthetic to other metaphysical principles, such as the true and the good, but in its relation to other motives and goals of human activity and creation.

All of this, of course, entails a considerable shift in the methods and material of thought. The notion of function replaces the notion of beauty as the basic methodological premise.⁵⁹

The aesthetic as an *energetic* component of human activity, this 'dynamic conception of the aesthetic not as a "thing", as *ergon*, but "*energeia*"',⁶⁰ opened a completely different view onto the question of the aesthetic outside of the field of art proper: rather than taking the form of natural beauty, whose relation to artistic beauty had to be conceived in the form of a hierarchy, the aesthetic outside of art became a matter of anthropological intention and application; rather than inhering in the *object* it became an operation of the perceiving *subject*.⁶¹ Mukařovský drew the following consequence from this shift: 'Whereas in the preceding case the two spheres (i.e., the aesthetic outside of art and art) seemed to be separated by a chasm that had to be crossed, now the interrelation of the aesthetic outside of art and the aesthetic within art will appear so close that the two domains will merge at countless points, and the difficulty will be to distinguish them rather than to seek a connection between them'; and he concludes that 'we shall find no sphere in which the aesthetic function is essentially absent; potentially it is always present'.⁶² For Mukařovský, then, the conception of an aesthetic function *eliminated* the premise of aesthetic autonomy, rather than presupposing such autonomy as it had for Teige. Rather than conceiving aesthetic activity as taking place in a laboratory and defining the aesthetic function in privative fashion — as the emancipation from all utilitarian functions — Mukařovský envisioned 'the aesthetic outside of art' as an attitude of the perceiving subject, and thus as an omnipresent field where the aesthetic function comes into incessant contact and dynamic interaction with the other functions.

This distinction from Teige was made possible by the particular way Mukařovský understood polyfunctionality. As we have seen, Teige framed this as the result of a gradual historical development whereby the originary embeddedness of the aesthetic function within utilitarian functions gave way to the increasing independence of the former. We have also seen that Teige never explicitly distinguished his later embrace of aesthetic autonomy from his earlier monofunctionalist identification of beauty with perfected fulfilment of practical purpose. Mukařovský, by contrast,

59 Mukařovský, 'The Place of the Aesthetic Function', pp. 32–33; 'Místo estetické funkce', pp. 170–71.

60 Květoslav Chvatík, *Strukturální estetika* (Brno: Host, 2001), p. 65.

61 Mukařovský wrote: 'Functions must not be one-sidedly projected onto an object but must be considered primarily with a subject as their live source'; Mukařovský, 'The Place of the Aesthetic Function', p. 38; 'Místo estetické funkce', p. 175.

62 Mukařovský, 'The Place of the Aesthetic Function', pp. 34 and 35; 'Místo estetické funkce', pp. 171–72 and 173.

reflected explicitly on the difference between mono- and polyfunctionalism and what the consequences were for a conception of the aesthetic function.

Mukařovský began where Teige had also begun: with functionalist architecture. Mukařovský's most direct analysis of the question of functions in architecture was published in *Stavba*, the architecture journal where Teige had been an editor from 1923 till 1934 (and editor in chief from 1924 till 1927) and where Teige had published his critique of Le Corbusier's Mundaneum project eight years earlier.⁶³ That Mukařovský was well aware of this background is indicated by a somewhat gratuitously favourable reference to Teige as well as several implicitly critical references to Le Corbusier. But such gestures of alliance aside, Mukařovský's essay in fact reveals how his understanding of polyfunctionality and the aesthetic function differs from Teige's.

Mukařovský presupposed a historical account similar to Teige's, tracing the development from an originary interconnection between various functions, in particular utility and aesthetic functions (evident in phenomena such as archaic forms of magic or ritual aspects of folklore) to a modern state of 'the maximal autonomy of functions', a condition brought about by the development of technology and ever more powerful and monofunctionally conceived machines.⁶⁴ Further, he regarded the monofunctionalist precepts of functionalist architecture as one of the major expressions of this modern attitude. But he treated this modern monofunctionalist attitude with scepticism. In particular he took issue with the monofunctionalist understanding of architecture: 'The comparison of an architectural creation with a machine (Corbusier) is an extreme expression of the tendency of a period toward the least ambiguous functionality in architecture, but in no way is it a supratemporal characteristic'.⁶⁵ That Mukařovský took Le Corbusier to task for being excessively monofunctionalist is ironic, given that the core of the Mundaneum polemic was Le Corbusier's defence of the need to 'add' the beauty function to architectural utility against Teige's monofunctionalist critique. This becomes even more ironic when Mukařovský then criticizes Le Corbusier once again (without naming him, though for loyal readers of *Stavba* the context would have been clear) for precisely the 'utility plus beauty' formulation Teige had criticized eight years earlier: 'The aesthetic function appears in architecture as something added, something coming from outside. It tends to be found on the surface of a building (cf. the ornament; it even used to be proclaimed that architecture begins where construction ends)'.⁶⁶ So Mukařovský occupied a position somewhere in between the stakes of the Mundaneum debate: between the monofunctionalist doctrine Teige had brought to the debate and the 'utility plus beauty' version of polyfunctionalism with which Le Corbusier had responded.

63 Jan Mukařovský, 'K problému funkcí v architektuře', in Mukařovský, *Studie z estetiky*, pp. 196–203; 'On the Problem of Functions in Architecture', in Mukařovský, *Structure, Sign and Function*, pp. 236–50. Originally published in *Stavba*, 14 (1937–38), 5–12.

64 Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions', p. 238; 'K problému funkcí', p. 197.

65 Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions', p. 240; 'K problému funkcí', p. 198.

66 Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions', p. 246; 'K problému funkcí', p. 201.

Mukařovský's interest in architecture focused on the fact that it is the cultural field where the modern drive towards monofunctionalism became both most starkly evident and obviously insufficient. A few years later he again singled out Le Corbusier (rather than Teige) for criticism in this regard:

Here we find ourselves at the point where we disagree, especially as regards the theory, with original functionalism, whose principles were expressed with crystal clarity in architectural functionalism. Architectural functionalism proceeds from the premise that a building has a single, precisely delimited function given by the purpose for which it is built. Hence Le Corbusier's well-known comparison of a building to a machine, a typically unambiguous product from a functional point of view. Functionalism was thus an unusually fruitful notion as a developmental stage of architecture, and it was also theoretically justified as a polemic against the preceding historicizing period, which delighted in assuming a purpose other than the one for which a building had been constructed. Nevertheless, its weakness soon became apparent. A building, especially a residence, cannot be limited to a single function, because it is a setting for human life, and human life is heteromorphous.⁶⁷

A building never serves a single function: 'There is no unambiguous functionality here'.⁶⁸ Aside from the obvious fact that even specialized building-types inevitably house various activities with at times conflicting functional requirements, and the fact that buildings are commonly repurposed to new uses (a stock-exchange might become a university building, for example), Mukařovský pointed out that the term 'function' itself contains four 'horizons': beyond the immediate function privileged by the monofunctionalist attitude there were historical, social, and individual functional horizons, each with its own set of criteria.⁶⁹ One of these horizons usually dominated at a particular moment, but a building could never perfectly fulfil all of them simultaneously and always had to be regarded as the agglomeration of such functional horizons — and, moreover, as an agglomeration in a process of perpetual readjustment and change. If a decommissioned power station is transformed into an art museum, for example, the vast interior spaces that originally served a utility function to house enormous generators take on an aesthetic function as their new dominant. Far from being the cultural practice where the identification of a practical function is clearest (a fundamental tenet of functionalist architecture), architecture for Mukařovský provides the clearest demonstration that 'in essence all the functions are potentially present in every human act insofar as they are at all compatible with the given act'.⁷⁰

But architecture — because of the stridency with which monofunctionalist claims had so recently been made for it — was only a particularly instructive example of a broader truth: *all* human activity was polyfunctional. Monofunctionalism may have

67 Mukařovský 'The Place of the Aesthetic Function', p. 37; 'Místo estetické funkce', p. 174.

68 Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions', p. 243; 'K problému funkcí', p. 199.

69 Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions', pp. 241–43; 'K problému funkcí', p. 199.

70 Mukařovský, 'On the Problem of Functions', pp. 240–41; 'K problému funkcí', p. 198. Elsewhere Mukařovský wrote of 'the basic polyfunctionality of human activity and the omnipresence of functions'; 'The Place of the Aesthetic Function', p. 37; 'Místo estetické funkce', p. 174.

become a dominant modern attitude because of the extraordinary development of machines, but it was a misguided attitude. The aim of Structuralism was to correct this through observation and analysis of the complex interactions among functions. The idea that various, often conflicting functions are always ‘bundled’, and that the hierarchy of the dominant function to the other functions is always potentially in flux, is at the core of Mukařovský’s conception of polyfunctionalism. In his important essay ‘Místo estetické funkce mezi ostatními’ [The Place of the Aesthetic Function Among the Other Functions, 1942] the notion of four ‘functional horizons’ in his earlier essay on architecture received more sophisticated form. Here he presented a typology whereby functions were divided between those that directly affected the outer world (the immediate functions) and those that did so in mediated fashion (the semiotic functions). These two groups were further divided into those orientated towards the object and those orientated towards the subject, giving rise to a final typology with four fields: the practical functions (immediate and object-orientated), the theoretical function (immediate and subject-orientated), the symbolic function (semiotic and object-orientated), and the aesthetic function (semiotic and subject-orientated).⁷¹ The productive subtleties generated by this framing of functionalist rhetoric within semiotic and anthropological claims cannot concern us here, but what is important is the way that for Mukařovský the aesthetic function was firmly embedded within a wider structure that did not separate but rather *connected* it to the wider world and to practical activity. In this way Mukařovský’s Structuralist model resisted notions of aesthetic autonomy while also according a fundamental anthropological role to art and to aesthetic activity.

Here we also see the main difference from Teige’s polyfunctionalism. For Teige the shift to a polyfunctional model brought an emphasis on the independence and separation of the various functions, with the consequent postulate of an autonomous, ‘purified’ aesthetic function. But Mukařovský’s polyfunctionalism emphasized the interconnections among the functions, the contacts and competition, the jostling for dominance within the structural whole. In the architecture essay Mukařovský criticized excessive emphasis on understanding aesthetic activity through the criterion of emancipation and autonomy, on regarding art as

the realm of free lyricism unlimited by extra-artistic consideration — in other words, the realm of the predominant aesthetic function. [...] If we view art in all its temporal, spatial, and social breadth, it appears that the tendency toward the domination of the aesthetic function over the others is in no art any more than just a tendency that remains not completely realized, even in the most extreme cases. [...] The historical development of every art is accompanied by a constant alternation of ebbs and flows of extra-aesthetic functions, and even in the purest artistic creation [*ani v esteticky nejčistším uměleckém výtvoru*] these function are not eliminated but are only re-organized.⁷²

71 Mukařovský ‘The Place of the Aesthetic Function’, pp. 40–42; ‘Místo estetické funkce’, pp. 177–79. Mukařovský specified that in contrast to the other components of his typology it was necessary to speak of the practical functions in the plural, as the close integration with the heterogeneity of the real world resulted in greater diversity.

72 Mukařovský, ‘On the Problem of Functions’, pp. 247–48; ‘K problému funkcí’, pp. 201–02.

Again, Mukařovský has been too polite to name Teige. But he could have. If his repeated association of a misguided architectural monofunctionalism with Le Corbusier was a diplomatic way to avoid noting Teige's earnest commitment to this position in the 1920s, here he implicitly (yet equally diplomatically) criticized the particular version of polyfunctionalism that Teige adopted in the 1930s. As we have seen, 'purity' (*čistota*) was one of Teige's central terms for describing the emancipated aesthetic function. Teige's emphasis on the purity of the aesthetic function resulted in part from the terms with which he had criticized Le Corbusier's 'utility plus beauty' model during the Mundaneum debate: it responded to what Mukařovský glossed as the mistaken conception of the aesthetic function 'as something added, something coming from outside'. But comparison with Mukařovský's understanding of polyfunctionality reveals how Teige's conception of a pure aesthetic function carried over fundamental 'anti-ornament' priorities and convictions from his monofunctionalist period into his polyfunctionalist phase. As a result, *Ars Una* may have provided a common space to house the various activities that had been separated by the dualism of the Constructivism–Poetism period, but it never quite found a home in the world.

CHAPTER 6



Socialist Surrealism: Realism Debates

Few aesthetic conflicts of the mid-twentieth-century appear as stubbornly irresolvable as what has been called the ‘realism debate’ that unfolded, in particular, among Marxist critics and philosophers in the 1930s. The singular term ‘debate’ stands here for a phenomenon that is decidedly plural. The best-known version of this debate unfolded in exchanges by a range of authors in the German-language exile journal *Das Wort* [The Word], published in Moscow in 1937–38, and included contributions by figures as prominent as Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács. On a broader level, however, the exchanges about realism and Expressionism in *Das Wort* are simply a conveniently compact formulation of questions about the relation of aesthetics and politics confronting Marxist proponents of the avant-garde or realism in many countries in the mid- to late thirties.¹ For example, the manoeuvring of Breton’s Surrealists vis-à-vis the cultural authorities in Moscow invoked similar issues and exchanges, as did the never-ending tensions between the Devětsil Poetists and Czechoslovak Surrealists on the one hand and their interlocutors defending Proletkult and, later, Socialist Realism on the other.² The vast differences in the aesthetic assumptions and artistic products defended on each side of the debate seem to admit of no theoretical reconciliation. It is not even clear that the insistent attempts to hash out these differences, with their associated

1 In what follows, I shall refer to the particular debate that unfolded in and around *Das Wort* as the ‘Expressionism debate’ and shall use the term ‘realism debate’ for the broader context. Major materials relevant to the Expressionism debate are collected in Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, ed., *Die Expressionismusdebatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973); and a selection of these (and related) documents in English appears in *New Left Review*, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977). For a recent discussion of theoretical underpinnings of the wider realism debate, see Josh Robinson, ‘Realism and Modernism, Aesthetics and Politics: Lukács, Brecht, Adorno’, in *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West*, ed. by Irina Wutsdorff, Michał Mrugalski and Schamma Schahadat (Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 451–71.

2 On tensions between Breton’s Surrealists and Moscow, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988). On Czechoslovak versions of this realism debate, see Roman Kanda, *Český literárněvědný marxismus: Kapitoly z moderního projektu* (Prague and Brno: Ústav pro české literatury AVČR and Host, 2021), Chapter 2; and Shawn Clybor, ‘Socialist (Sur)Realism: Karel Teige, Ladislav Štoll, and the Politics of Communist Culture in Czechoslovakia’, *History of Communism in Europe*, 2 (2011), 143–67.

bitter polemics, were very enlightening. At times the debate appeared as a grand drama touching on the essential issues of modern aesthetics, yet at other times it descended into an abstraction of argument that seemed nearly as scholastic as the medieval realism debates of the fourteenth century.³ The ambiguity about what precisely was at stake has thus at times lent the twentieth-century realism debate the appearance of a literary-theoretical feud between modern-day Montagues and Capulets, reincarnated as proponents of modernism and of realism (especially Socialist Realism).

This impression is heightened by the pronounced sense of urgency saturating these exchanges. Both sides felt that that it was not only possible but even crucial to resolve these issues and demonstrate the error of the opposing camp. More was at stake than just aesthetic method. The antagonists in the debate did not accuse each other merely of producing 'bad art' — bad art rarely causes people to feel so threatened — but of producing fundamentally *false* images. Fredric Jameson has described Georg Lukács's critical conception of modernist 'decadence' as:

the equivalent in the aesthetic realm of that of 'false consciousness' in the domain of traditional ideological analysis. Both suffer from the same defect: the common presupposition that in the world of culture and society such a thing as pure error is possible. They imply, in other words, that works of art or systems of philosophy are conceivable which have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the 'serious' issues of the day [...].⁴

While the aesthetic absolutism Jameson describes here has served many as evidence of Lukács's traditionalism and sheer prejudice against modernist art and literature, it should be noted that proponents of the avant-garde were rarely less presumptuous of the error and emptiness of literary and artistic realism — and Teige is an exemplary figure of such intolerance. Thus ostensibly aesthetic issues merged seamlessly with broader campaigns against false consciousness. The argument left no room for peaceful co-habitation, for differences of taste or temperament. One position was right and the other, consequently, could not simply be ignored but had to have its error demonstrated and its proponents converted or silenced.

This absolutism is connected with the term 'realism' itself. Again, in Jameson's words:

the originality of the concept of realism [...] lies in its claim to cognitive as well as aesthetic status. [...] the ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic

3 Thus in the 1980s Fredric Jameson described the realism debate as an aesthetic event 'whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today'; Fredric Jameson, 'Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate', in Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), II, 133–47 (p. 133). Yet not long before this Peter Bürger had argued that the version of this debate between Lukács and Adorno only arose out of their failure to realize that the categories they invoked had already been made obsolete and irrelevant by the historical avant-garde; see Peter Bürger *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 86–87. But see also Galin Tihanov's balanced comments in *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of their Time* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), pp. 104–05.

4 Jameson, 'Reflections', p. 138.

experience that yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis that had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgments and its constitution as sheer appearance.⁵

Such an expansion of aesthetic into cognitive concerns necessarily foreclosed on tolerance of alternatives. Aesthetics assumed the function of a privileged tool for recognizing the distinctive features of the present; to get aesthetic principles 'wrong' thus meant being fundamentally misled about the social, political, and historical moment in which one participated.

Cast in the foregoing terms the realism debate is indeed irresolvable. Attending to the negative side of this debate, however — what it might mean to get one's own historical moment 'wrong' — opens a different perspective on the realism debate. Intractability suddenly gives way to common rhetoric: a rhetoric smearing the error of one's antagonist as 'historicism', or cognitive disjunction from one's own time. Historicism, as we have seen, is one of Teige's key terms, and it occurs in surprising places elsewhere in the realism debate as well. Thus the following discussion explores this shared notion of historicism by staging a realism debate between two central European theorists who were contemporaries but never direct interlocutors: Teige and Lukács. Lukács is well known for his defence in the 1930s of literary realism and in particular for his championing of the genre of the historical novel. Less often noted is that he opposed these ideas to that of a degraded 'historicist' consciousness that he associated, surprisingly, with modernism. Lukácsian realism thus provides an illuminating foil for Teige's unified-field theory of the avant-garde as a rejection of historicism. Juxtaposing Lukács's and Teige's claims reveals that while the positive aesthetic prescriptions each put forward are of course entirely at odds, the negative backdrop for their prescriptions — something each labelled 'historicism' — is remarkably similar.

This rhetoric of historicism reveals the common foundation for the apparently irreconcilable prescriptive claims of modernism and realism in that it underscores how *both* sides regarded aesthetics as an instrument of cognition.⁶ This shared concern has been obscured by literary historical accounts (including Jameson's) identifying these cognitive claims primarily with proponents of realism. The reason for this identification is understandable. Realism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is often portrayed as the belated offspring of Hegelian aesthetics, that is, as the product of a Hegelian subordination of aesthetics to concepts and to the expression of 'truth' about specified contents, which explains the recurring emphasis on didactic art in the realist traditions (especially Socialist Realism).⁷

5 Ibid., p. 135.

6 This observation counters Perry Anderson's now classic diagnosis — made in reference to Western Marxism but *mutatis mutandis* applicable to the modernist aesthetics those Western Marxists generally championed — of a retreat to a notion of 'art as consolation, pessimism as quiescence'; Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 93.

7 For authors writing under the political and aesthetic onus of Stalinism and Zhdanovite Socialist Realism, the progression from realism to didacticism to political prescription and censorship — to aesthetic 'terrorism' — appeared all too easy. See Robert Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost a*

This subordination of aesthetics to concepts and truth-claims can be recognized in the emphases on totality (expressing art's necessary function as a vehicle for 'true' content rather than as an autonomous phenomenon), on artistic over natural beauty (expressing beauty's grounding in concepts and content), and on reflection (expressing the priority of 'reality' over aesthetics).⁸ Any such account, however, must recognize that this Hegelian, realist tradition co-existed with a parallel tradition stemming from Kantian aesthetics: a tradition often regarded as leading to modernism proper and as taking its most extreme form in the twentieth-century avant-garde.⁹ This alternative tradition countered the principles of realism through emphases on art's independence from conceptual truth-claims (associated with the notion of the autonomy of art), on the priority of nature and the material over spirit (associated with critiques of 'idealisms' of various kinds), and on beauty's immanence to form (and thus its independence from particular content). From such a perspective, the realism debate in twentieth-century aesthetics appears to have its roots in a fundamental division located more or less at the origin of modern aesthetics: a Manichean conflict between Hegelian 'conceptual' aesthetics and Kantian 'formalist' aesthetics.

As tidy as this scheme is, and as much as it appears to explain the frequency of terms such as 'formalism' and 'reflection' in the realism debate, it is misleading even on the broad level on which it is meant to apply. First, it codifies the debate into a series of conceptual dichotomies that is enormously expandable — Hegelian versus Kantian, content versus form, totality versus fragment, rationality versus irrationality, fact versus value, and more — which are as impossible to resolve as were the various dualisms we saw underlying Teige's thought in Chapter Two. These dichotomies offer no criterion for determining which conceptual opposition might represent the primary or essential issue, thus strengthening the impression that at base the debate was simply a feud over cultural-political power. Second, and most important, this scheme disguises precisely what the two camps shared: the common vocabulary of a cognitive aesthetics. It is true that many interpreters have noted how each side of the realism debate represents but one element of a dialectical unity, inseparable from and necessarily summoning the diametrically opposed

marxismus (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970), pp. 19 and 39.

8 All of these are facets of what Peter Zima identifies as Hegelian 'heteronomous' aesthetics in contrast to Kantian autonomous aesthetics; see Peter Zima, *Literarische Ästhetik: Methoden und Modelle der Literaturwissenschaft*, 3rd edn (Tübingen: Francke, 2020), Chapter 1. See also Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost*, pp. 17–25.

9 In addition to Zima, who describes modern aesthetics as a 'pendulum' swinging between the poles of heteronomous Hegelian 'content' and autonomous Kantian 'expressive' aesthetics (ibid., p. 30), see for example Norbert Schneider's identification of one of the theoretical sources for twentieth-century abstract art in Kant's claim (in Section 16 of the *Critique of Judgment*) that the *freie Schönheit* of objects such as flowers, parrots, crustaceans, and wallpaper resides purely in their form rather than any concept; see Norbert Schneider, *Geschichte der Ästhetik von der Aufklärung bis zur Postmoderne*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997), pp. 53–55. For an argument that challenges such genealogies by reading Hegel as (albeit unwittingly) laying theoretical foundations for abstract art, see Robert B. Pippin, 'What Was Abstract Art (From the Point of View of Hegel)?', in *Critical Inquiry*, 29.1 (2003), 1–24.

position; yet even when this dialectical interdependence has been emphasized, the result is generally hypostatization of the conflict.¹⁰ Those accounts that have tried to move away from the various conceptual oppositions typically used to define the debate have seen that opposition return with a vengeance on the higher-order, seemingly inevitable, level of 'realism versus anti-realism'.¹¹

But such a polarity ignores the cognitive claims raised by modernism as well as realism. The realism debate, in fact, contrasted fundamentally opposed understandings of what constituted 'realistic' artistic representation. Defenders of avant-garde and modernist techniques commonly insisted on the 'realism' of their art just as much as did the theorists of realism, they just denied that 'traditional' Realism was the proper formula for achieving realistic representation in the present. They argued in essence that artistic representations corresponding to the complexities of modern reality could only be achieved through intricate processes and ended up taking startling, counter-intuitive forms. Brecht, for example, criticized Lukács's equation of realism with the particular literary forms developed by Balzac and Tolstoy by stating: 'Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists. [...] Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change'.¹² A similar belief is expressed in Teige's striking claim from a few years earlier that 'Surrealism

10 As Eugene Lunn warned, 'the tendencies to divide the field up between [twentieth-century realism and modernism] and to see the two positions as antithetical and mutually exclusive are real errors, ones made frequently in the many attempts to reconstruct [Lukács's and Brecht's] "debate" as a means of championing Brecht's contributions'; Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 77.

11 Thus Jameson posited behind every modernist work a 'cancelled realistic' work against which the reader interprets the formal and symbolic strangeness of the modernist work' (Jameson, 'Beyond the Cave', in Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, II, 115–31 (p. 129). Terry Eagleton made a similar point: 'There is no "modernism" without its attendant "realism"; historically positioned as we are, we cannot possibly identify a "modernist" text without automatically thinking up the "realist" canon from which it deviates'; Terry Eagleton, '"Aesthetics and Politics"', in *New Left Review*, 107 (1978), 21–34 (p. 34). Such statements may argue for a dialectical linkage between modernism and realism but they absolutize an *a priori* concept of realistic representation. See also Hayden White's claim that 'Modernism resolves the problems posed by traditional realism, namely, how to represent reality realistically, by simply abandoning the ground on which realism is construed in terms of an opposition between fact and fiction. The denial of the reality of the event undermines the very notion of fact informing traditional realism'; Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event', in Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 66–86 (pp. 66–67). Statements such as these raise doubts about Roman Jakobson's extremely relativistic understanding of realism as being reinvented by every artistic generation: it would rather seem that 'traditional' realism, or Realism, still has a certain unassailable status as reference point even now; see Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art' (1921), in Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 19–27 (p. 22).

12 Bertolt Brecht, 'Popularity and Realism', *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 79–85 (p. 82). German original: 'Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus', in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, pp. 329–36 (p. 333). The section titled 'Against Georg Lukács' in *Aesthetics and Politics* (pp. 68–85) collates several essays that Brecht wrote in 1938 to engage in the Expressionism Debate in *Das Wort* but never published. German originals in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, pp. 302–36.

is *realism in the dialectical sense*'.¹³ More than ten years earlier Teige had declared that '*the spirit of Cubism was realism*', and around that same time Roman Jakobson asserted: 'classicists, sentimentalists, the romanticists to a certain extent, even the "realists" of the nineteenth century, the modernists to a large degree, and finally the futurists, expressionists and their like, have more than once steadfastly proclaimed faithfulness to reality, verisimilitude — in other words, realism — as the guiding motto of their artistic program'.¹⁴ If the degree to which many avant-gardists insisted on the realism of their artistic methods seems surprising, no less surprising is Lukács's insistence, made in defence of realism, that the failure of avant-garde art consisted in its adherence to the mere appearance of things, to 'reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface', to the copying of outer forms without the work of mediation that would reveal the 'true', organic essence underneath.¹⁵ Precisely the distance that separated avant-garde formal vocabularies from standard notions of realistic representation became, for Lukács, not so much the sign of excessive technical reworking, as one would most expect, but rather the symptom of unmediated imitation of superficial appearances.

Here — rather than in any rigid dichotomies such as form versus content or realism versus anti-realism — is where the realism debate proved so intractable. The feud was interminable because each side raised such similar cognitive claims: each claimed to portray a 'deeper', essential reality, arrived at through a laborious process of mediation. The sources for such claims are overdetermined. They can be traced back on a very general level to the Hegelian distinction between appearance and essence. More specifically they are comparable to conceptions of 'metaphysical mimesis', which Richard T. Gray deems a legacy of Nietzsche's influence on Expressionism and which 'subscribed to the belief in a *deeper*, more authentic dimension of reality *beyond* (or *below*) the world of empirical phenomena', and in Teige's case one might note his adoption and revision of André Breton's notion of the 'interior model', involving a historical shift away from the principle of imitation of an exterior model towards an aesthetic principle focused on 'internal' mental or spiritual images.¹⁶ Correspondingly, each side of the debate claimed that the other

13 Karel Teige, 'Deset let surrealismu' [Ten Years of Surrealism, 1934], in Karel Teige, *Výbor*, II, 139–89 (p. 55) (emphasis in original).

14 Karel Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti', in *Život II*, ed. by Jaromír Krejcar (Prague: Výtvarný odbor Umělecké besedy, 1922), pp. 119–42 (p. 133), emphasis in original. Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 19–27 (p. 20).

15 Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 28–59 (p. 33). German original: 'Es geht um den Realismus', in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, pp. 192–230.

16 See Robinson, 'Realism and Modernism, Aesthetics and Politics', p. 459 (Robinson links this appearance/essence distinction to Lukácsian realism but in fact it holds for both sides of the debate); Richard T. Gray, 'Metaphysical Mimesis: Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragödie* and the Aesthetics of Literary Expressionism', in *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism*, ed. by Neil H. Donahue (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), pp. 39–65 (p. 47, emphases in original); and Josef Vojvodík, 'The Interior Model', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art, 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 241–50; and Josef Vojvodík, *Povrch, skrytost, ambivalence: Manýrismus, baroko a (česká) avantgarda* (Prague: Argo, 2008), pp. 219–39. See also Karel Teige, 'The Inner Model' (1945), trans. by Alexandra Büchler, in Karel Teige,

remained entangled in and misled by a superficial, merely apparent reality. Lukács criticized the modernists for 'reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface', while Adorno countered that Lukács 'finds himself ensnared in the same cult of immediacy of which he myopically accuses avant-gardist works: the fallacy of mere assertion. Art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically [...] but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality'.¹⁷ This rhetoric of surface and deeper or veiled essence pervaded both sides of the realism debate and, given the absence of binding criteria for determining when the essential mother lode of truth had been uncovered, remained patently irresolvable. Thus, ironically, the debate hit a blank wall not because of the differences and dichotomies that ceaselessly arose but rather because of the similar use of the distinction between unmediated surface appearance and deeper, essential reality.

The term 'historicism' provides a lens that brings these shared cognitive assumptions into sharper focus. Scholars have long noted an affinity or even symbiosis between nineteenth-century realism and historicism.¹⁸ The relevance of conceptions of historicism to the twentieth-century realism debate stands forth clearly in Lukács's statement that the aim of the artwork is to reflect objective reality 'as it really is' ('wie sie tatsächlich *beschaffen* ist').¹⁹ The echo here of perhaps the most famous dictum of mid-nineteenth-century historicism — Leopold von Ranke's call for historians to explore the past 'as it actually was' ('wie es eigentlich gewesen ist') is unmissable and for many interpreters supports an account of the debate in which Lukács represents an inherently traditionalist position, a sort of historicism in the present tense. The traditionalism implied by this barely concealed kinship with Rankean historicism would consist both in the belief that an unproblematic objectivity or immediate representation of the real (whether past or present) is attainable, and even more in Lukács's prescription of an already-canonized artistic method (that is, Realism). Opponents of Lukács's conception of realism have often rejected it as the aesthetic expression of historical paralysis, as his inability to conceive of cultural development and historical change. Paradoxically, then, the assertion of Lukács's affinity with historicism concludes that Lukácsian realism was dogmatically *ahistorical*, his faith in immediate objectivity in effect amounting to a form of idealism inconsistent with the postulate of ongoing historical change. This was a fairly common line of argument in particular for leftist critics in the 1960s and 1970s. Russell Berman, for example, claimed that Lukács's 'uncritical

1900–1951: *L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 339–46.

17 Theodor Adorno, 'Reconciliation Under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 151–76 (p. 162), translation modified. German original: 'Erpreßte Versöhnung: Zu Georg Lukács: "Wider den mißverstandenen Realismus"', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur I*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 251–80 (p. 264).

18 See in particular the exploration of the narrative strategies of nineteenth-century historical realism in Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

19 Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', p. 33, translation modified; 'Es geht um den Realismus', p. 198.

acceptance of the categories of traditional 19th-century aesthetics' resulted from the presumption of an *a priori* 'transhistorical structure' or of a 'rigid utopia outside of history'; and Berman further argued that the 'repressive quality inherent in the Lukácsian dialectic' was the consequence of Lukács's unquestioning acceptance of 'the objective form in which the world appears' and his conviction that Marxism-Leninism allowed him to 'see how the world really is'.²⁰

There are several difficulties with such an interpretation. The most obvious is that it associates this allegedly unquestioning or naïve objectivity with the immediate representation of reality; yet immediacy is hardly a desideratum for Lukács. Quite the contrary, Lukács insisted that objectivity was only achieved through a complex process of mediation. Such mediation, he further argued, was essential precisely because it made the complexity of developing historical dynamics comprehensible. Lukács's distance from any naïve notion of immediate objectivity becomes even clearer when one considers his own critique of Rankean historicism. For Lukács's condemnations of Rankean historicism as trivial and desiccated were at times expressed with a degree of scorn one would sooner expect from a furious Futurist standing before a National Museum — and, what is more, we shall see that Lukács's implicit logic was remarkably similar to what a Futurist might have used, albeit articulated in more theoretical language. Thus if the term 'historicism' is to serve as a useful interpretive lens for the realism debate, it will not be because it allows a contrast between one position designated as historicist, and thus in some manner traditionalist or retrogressive, and another position designated as progressive or liberating. Rather, the term is useful because it describes, almost in the manner of a codeword, what was derided by both realist and avant-gardist alike.

Understanding this discourse of realism as opposition not to modernism but rather to historicism shifts the terms of the realism debate away from questions of rejection or retention of this or that artistic technique or aesthetic legacy. The particular aesthetic prescriptions championed by Lukács and Teige represented cognitive tools for answering a broader question: how is the modern historical identity to be accurately represented? What is the proper *style of the present*? At issue in the realism debate was thus the historical periodization or identity of the present as an integrated epoch. But this question of periodization went beyond mere nomenclature, for the process of naming involved not only observation but also selection: both sides alleged there were aspects of the present that did not properly belong to it, and which the interpreter had to guard against at the risk of some sort of cognitive expulsion from his or her own era. Historicism, in both Lukács's and Teige's writings, designated just these aspects: events or phenomena that may be occurring in the present but that should not be regarded as 'truly' contemporary.

The realism debate thus unfolded, and could only unfold, in a gap between two temporal registers. Reinhart Koselleck has commented that the modern period (his discussion focuses on the German term *Neuzeit*, in contrast to those period formulations utilizing the term *Alter*, 'age' or 'epoch') produced the first

20 Russell Berman, 'Lukács' Critique of Bredel and Ottwalt: A Political Account of an Aesthetic Debate of 1931–32', in *New German Critique*, 10 (1977), 155–78 (pp. 168–69 and pp. 170–71).

period label where pure temporality or chronology was made to bear the weight of epochal signification. Whereas the majority of period labels refers to a content deemed characteristic of the designated segment of time (Medieval, Renaissance, Romanticism, and so on, even if these are ideological and contentious), *Neuzeit* refers only to the segment itself, to its temporal flow, whilst claiming an integral, epochal status equivalent to the 'closed' ages of the past.²¹ The specificity of the way both sides in the twentieth-century realism debate used the term 'realism' (as opposed to its nineteenth-century use) lies precisely in their insistent presumption of the convergence of these temporal registers, the chronological and the epochal. The style of the present, its 'realism', must comprehend the integral historical identity of the present. This claim to access reality through art combined a chronological register (reality as 'where we are right now', the most up-to-date report on our status) with an epochal register (reality as the 'truth of the present moment', or the present 'as it really is'). Such epochal claims explain the urgency of the debate. For what was at stake was not *a* style, *an* artistic technique, or *an* aesthetic strategy, that is, one option among several, but *the* integral identity of the present. Though each of the protagonists of the realism debate claimed to have put their finger on the point of convergence of these temporal registers, what the debate in all its intractability in fact demonstrates is the final parting of the chronological and the epochal. This divergence left its mark negatively, through the opposition of realism to historicism. For both Lukács and Teige, historicism represented the threat of a chronological identity that did not synchronize with the epochal — that is, the threat of a present moment that was not 'of this time'.

Realism Debate, Part One: Lukács and the Historicist Novel

The general features of Lukács's critique of modernist art, with its central concepts of decadence and formalism, are well known.²² That Lukács also associated these concepts with a critique of historicism, however, is rarely commented upon. This is due in part to his persistent emphasis on the need to cultivate a deeper historical sense: it is precisely the loss of such a historical sense and the consequent pettiness of a present conceived as unconditioned and self-postulating that were central aspects of the decadence Lukács perceived in modernist literature. His own elevation of the status of the historical novel genre, and the broad claims he made for it as a cognitive instrument, appear to reinforce an interpretation of Lukács as the defender of a specifically historical dimension of culture against the avant-garde ideal of a *tabula rasa* and 'rejection of history'. Lukács's avant-gardist interlocutors certainly perceived his aesthetic position in these terms: his claim that the avant-garde had reduced the cultural heritage to a rummage heap, and his stentorian appeals to 'the

21 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), pp. 304–05; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 224–25.

22 For some useful studies see Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave*; Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1979).

glorious literary past of the German people' were easily caricatured as the 'pious reverence towards the cultural heritage expected from the executors of a will'.²³ On a deeper level, Lukács's efforts to impose upon twentieth-century art the ideals and standards of a genre having its origin in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also easily understood as a form of historicist conservatism, as a call 'to keep to the Old Masters' and for literature to go 'back' to Tolstoy or Balzac.²⁴ Precisely such an understanding lay behind Brecht's turning the term 'formalism' around and applying it to Lukács's prescriptions for realism.²⁵ From this perspective, Lukács's call for contemporary literature to take the form of realism could appear as a literary form of the historicizing demand that modern architecture, say, should utilize the formal vocabulary of classical antiquity or the high Renaissance.

These two factors — the first a justified appreciation of the significance of the historical sense for Lukács's aesthetics, the second a contentious claim that Lukács was himself locked in a form of historicism — have obscured the significance of Lukács's own critique of historicism within his theory of realism. Nevertheless, historicism played a major role as a negative concept for Lukács, particularly in his major study *Der historische Roman* [*The Historical Novel*, 1937], where he implicitly contrasted historicism as a decadent form with the deeper historical sense exercised by novelists in the tradition of Scott. In fact, surprising as it first seems, Lukács managed in this text to link historicism with precisely those cultural practices that claimed to make the most radical break with the past and tradition: in *The Historical Novel*, Lukács portrays historicism as a fundamental characteristic of avant-garde art and literature.

Appreciating how this could be so requires examination of Lukács's account not only of the contemporary state of modernist art but also of its origins. Lukács viewed modernism as an extension of tendencies first appearing in the Naturalism of the later nineteenth-century. He wrote: 'I would maintain [...] that in modern writing there is a continuity from Naturalism to the Modernism of our day — a continuity restricted, admittedly, to underlying ideological principles. What at first was no more than dim anticipation of approaching catastrophes developed, after 1914, into an all-pervading obsession'.²⁶ That Lukács could identify the roots of modernist art, with its intentional disregard for conventional techniques of realistic representation, in Naturalism, for which the high burnish of such techniques was essential, makes clear that the status of traditional mimetic representation was not

23 The former quotation is from Lukács, 'Realism', p. 54; 'Es geht um den Realismus', p. 225. The latter is from Brecht's reply to the foregoing passage by Lukács (Brecht's comments quoted in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 56, n. 15).

24 Bertolt Brecht, '[The Essays of Georg Lukács]', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 68–69.

25 See Brecht's arguments in 'On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism' and in 'Popularity and Realism', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 70–74 and pp. 79–85. German original: 'Über den formalistischen Charakter der Realismustheorie' and 'Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus', in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, pp. 309–17 and pp. 329–36. See also Lunn's discussion of this aspect of the Lukács–Brecht exchange, in *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 87.

26 From *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, quoted in Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 397.

the central issue for Lukácsian realism. Put another way, Lukács felt that there was a level on which the mimetic principle could become so bloated that the result was no longer realism in the positive sense. For Lukács, the hyper-mimetic 'photographic' realism practised by the Naturalists was actually the disguised forerunner of the anti-mimetic montage techniques of the twentieth-century avant-garde:

Born of the nihilist theory and practice of the various Dadaist trends the theory of *montage* 'consolidated' itself in this period of 'relative stabilization' and became a deliberate surrogate for art: a special creative originality was supposed to manifest itself in the sticking together of disconnected facts. The art of *montage* reached on the one hand the utmost limit of naturalism, because it abandoned even the superficial linguistic-cum-atmospheric elaboration of the empirical world of the older naturalism; on the other, it reached the utmost limit of formalism, since the way in which details were linked no longer had anything to do with the objective inner dialectic of characters' lives — they are manipulated 'originally' from outside.²⁷

This surprising association of Naturalism and Dada was prompted through the central Lukácsian category of totality — or, more precisely, through the perception of its absence. The link between Naturalist description and Dadaist montage was their shared fascination with 'disconnected facts' and their development of techniques (such as montage or *reportage*) that, for Lukács, exaggerated the disconnection between the details presented. The luxuriant descriptive detail of Naturalism failed to hold together as a structured whole, and so, intentionally or not, produced the same effect as the purposefully anti-totalizing montage techniques of the Dadaists. Therefore, Naturalism fell under the pall of Lukács's indictment of modernism as decadent formalism, the hallmark of which was the collapse of a totalizing aesthetic presentation of 'objective reality' into a fragmented structure referring only to its own internal construction.²⁸

While Lukács insisted on the similarities between Naturalism and modernism, they did illustrate for him stages in a historical progression. Since Naturalism functions in Lukács's account as a transition phase between the classic realist and historical novels of the early nineteenth century and the full-blown modernism of the twentieth, it allows some insight into what Lukács felt went wrong in cultural practices once the bourgeoisie was no longer simply ascendant but had become dominant. Lukács made clear where he perceived the crucial historical moment for the subsequent development from Naturalism to modernist decadence: the revolutions of 1848. In the aftermath of these upheavals, the bourgeoisie in Lukács's account lost its role as the most progressive class; furthering its own

27 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 252. German original: Georg Lukács, *Der historische Roman* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1955), p. 271.

28 'Formalism' and 'naturalism' were of course not only Lukács's terms but were two of the main accusations Soviet proponents of Socialist Realism frequently invoked against their opponents; see Maria Mileeva, 'The Creative Mistakes of Socialist Realism', in *New Narratives of Russian and East European Art: Between Traditions and Revolutions*, ed. by Galina Mardilovich and Maria Taroutina (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 136–50 (p. 139).

interests no longer meant furthering the interests of society as a whole. Faced with 'historical competition' from the class it was now forced to oppress in its own interests, bourgeois ideology hardened into less truthful, less pliant, but more easily defended forms. Lukács perceived a significant echo of this ideological hardening in the shift in the dominant understanding of historical change after 1848. Lukács argued that one of the greatest, most progressive effects of the revolutions of the ascendant bourgeoisie (the 1789 French Revolution most prominently) had been the emergence of the modern historical consciousness as the dialectical understanding of historical change through contradiction (Hegel and Augustin Thierry served him as favourite examples of such consciousness). The 1848 revolutions, however, marked the emergence of an implicitly reactionary phenomenon: a phenomenon that could be called the modern historicist consciousness. This new, historicist consciousness, in an effort to counter the spectre of further historical change, now denied the contradictory nature of historical development embraced earlier and formulated a notion of linear, evolutionary progress that effectively reduced history to an unthreatening system of sociological laws or to a compilation of curious facts. Lukács perceived this retreat from the appreciation of history as a dialectical process of radical contradiction and violent change in particular in the rise to dominance of Rankean historicism:

[...] Ranke and his school are denying the idea of a contradictory process of human advance. According to their conception history has no direction, no summits and no depressions: 'All epochs of history are equally near to God'. Thus, there is perpetual movement, but it has no direction: history is a collection and reproduction of interesting facts about the past.²⁹

By reducing history to isolated details, the historicist consciousness entrapped the past at a safe remove from the present and thereby protected itself against any historical claims the former might raise against the latter.

This shift in historical consciousness provided the framework for Lukács's analysis of the incubation and emergence of first Naturalist and then modernist cultural decadence. The transition from the realist and historical novel that had flourished in the first half of the century (and that Lukács greatly admired) to the Naturalist novel that would dominate the second half (and that Lukács deplored) reflected precisely this shift in historical consciousness.³⁰ Addressing the question of what art could draw from this new conception of the past, Lukács stated:

This past appears, more so even than the present, as a gigantic iridescent chaos. Nothing is really objectively and organically connected with the objective character of the present; and for this reason a freely roaming subjectivity can fasten where and how it likes. And since history has been deprived of its real inner greatness — the dialectic of contradictory development, which has

29 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 176; *Der historische Roman*, p. 186.

30 This shift in historical understanding was analogous and complementary to the shift from 'narration' to 'description' as narrative mode that Lukács identified in one of his other major analyses of the distinction between positive realism and defective Naturalism; see 'Narrate or Describe?', in Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), pp. 110–48.

been abstracted intellectually — all that remains for the artists of this period is a pictorial and decorative grandeur. History becomes a collection of exotic anecdotes.³¹

The past, denied any urgent connection with the present, became for the Naturalists a mere repository of themes and details that might add colour to a narrative but contained no cognitive power. This development constituted for Lukács a major corruption of the classical historical novel for two reasons. First, it reduced historical material to trite decoration. He wrote that ‘the severance of the present from history creates an historical novel which drops to the level of trite entertainment. Its themes are indiscriminate and unrelated and it is full of an adventurous or emptily antiquarian, an exciting or mythical exoticism’.³² Second, it initiated a spiralling process whereby historical detail had to be amassed in ever greater quantities in order to compensate for the lack of objective meaning. Lukács described ‘the principle of [...] photographic authenticity’ that underlay Naturalism in the following terms: ‘The ever more furious ransacking of technical dictionaries which goes on in the contemporary novel [...] must in the historical novel lead to archaeologism’.³³ Thus Lukács saw the details worked into Naturalist narratives as increasing in quantity precisely in proportion to their decreasing significance, thereby becoming caught in a self-perpetuating cycle of exaggeration that took its toll on the formal integrity of the Naturalist artwork: historical details served as disconnected fragments rather than elements of construction. Further, Lukács’s often shrill-sounding condemnations of the ‘perversity’ of Naturalism — which continued as a major theme in his criticism of modernist works — clearly referred to this same process. Precisely because the material was fundamentally barren of meaning, writers ‘are forced to search for more and more exquisite, abnormal, perverse etc. themes in order to escape monotony’.³⁴ Thus Lukács’s critique traced the following progression: from the pseudo-scientism of the post-1848 historicist consciousness, via the reduction of historical detail to empty, discontinuous, decorative fragments, to the exaggerations and perverse fascinations of Naturalism. The critique of modernism as formalist, decadent, and fragmented was simply the final extension, the apparently inevitable outcome, of this logic. That modernism ‘rejected history’ was irrelevant, as Naturalism had long before lost any true sense of the historical.

Lukács argued the link between historicism and modernism in another way as well. A historicizing Naturalist novel such as Flaubert’s 1862 *Salammbô*, set in ancient Carthage, may appear on the surface as an attempt to escape the present through a lush, detailed evocation of the past: he wrote that ‘Flaubert set himself a consistent programme: to reawaken a vanished world of no concern to us. It was precisely because of his deep hatred for modern society that he sought, passionately and paradoxically, a world which would in no way resemble it, which would have

31 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 182; *Der historische Roman*, p. 192.

32 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 183; *Der historische Roman*, p. 193.

33 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 198; *Der historische Roman*, p. 210.

34 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 194; *Der historische Roman*, p. 206.

no connection with it, direct or indirect'.³⁵ But Lukács did not stop with this criticism of the novel as escapist; he went a step further and claimed that, despite the desperate effort to flee from the boredom of bourgeois society into an exoticized past, the heaping of archaic detail in fact served only to lock the novel precisely in Flaubert's banal present. This is a dialectical twist that is central to Lukács's theory of the historical novel: a historical moment could only be represented in a cognitively valuable way if it were represented in some relation to the present, as the prehistory of the present:

[T]he remoulding of events, customs etc. in the past would simply come to this: the writer would allow those tendencies which were alive and active in the past and which in historical reality have led up to the present (but whose later significance contemporaries naturally could not see) to emerge with that emphasis which they possess in objective, historical terms for the product of this past, namely, the present'.³⁶

By contrast, Flaubert's archaeological detail, carefully manipulated so that its accuracy had no implications as a prehistory of the present, lost all meaning as a history of the past as well. Despite the careful reconstruction, *Salammô* according to Lukács had little or nothing to do with ancient Carthage. Because the details served merely for decorative effect rather than as an expression of the objective situation of a historical moment, they constituted nothing more than costumes draped over nineteenth-century bourgeois characters: 'In Flaubert there is no such connection between the outside world and the psychology of the principal characters. And the effect of this lack of connection is to degrade the archaeological exactness of the outer world: it becomes a world of historically exact *costumes and decorations*, no more than a pictorial frame within which a purely modern story is unfolded'.³⁷ With this rhetoric of superficial costume and decoration draped over a modern story, Lukács's critique of Naturalism echoes those critiques of historicist architecture as historicizing ornament attached in a superficial manner to a modern structure, whose influence on Teige we have seen so abundantly.

The 'modernizing of feelings, ideas and thoughts, combined with archaeological faithfulness towards things and customs of no concern to us, which can therefore appear only exotic' constituted for Lukács the major connection point between the degraded historicist consciousness and the rise of modernist art.³⁸ The paradox of equating archaism with modernization was for Lukács merely an apparent one. Since the historicizing details had from the start nothing to do with the past moment that they ostensibly recreated, the artistic structure they served to embellish was essentially a disguised modern novel about modern society. Here too Naturalism served to break down the organic totality of the realist historical novel, not only through the uncontrolled proliferation of discontinuous detail but also through the necessary tension between a decorative, 'outer' level of historical

35 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 185; *Der historische Roman*, p. 196.

36 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, pp. 61–62; *Der historische Roman*, p. 58.

37 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 189; *Der historische Roman*, p. 200 (emphasis in original).

38 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 195; *Der historische Roman*, p. 207.

detail and a hidden, 'inner' referent to contemporary society, through the creation of a 'compound of outward exoticism and inner modernity'.³⁹

Just as Lukács applied the themes of fragmentation and exaggeration from his account of Naturalism to his critique of modernism, so he insisted that this structural split between archaism and modernization characterized more than just the overtly archaicizing novels of Naturalist historicism. In his polemic with Ernst Bloch during the Expressionism debate, Lukács brought to bear a similar terminology of 'outer' layers disguising an 'inner' essence. Bloch had argued that the Expressionists' use of techniques such as montage and stream of consciousness were required to represent the discontinuous or fragmented character of contemporary society; representing this society through the accepted techniques of realism would in Bloch's view have constituted a vain attempt to 'play doctor at the sick-bed of capitalism' or to 'plaster over the surface of reality'.⁴⁰ Lukács accepted Bloch's assertion that contemporary reality appears discontinuous and agreed that this is the result of the intensification of capitalist society. But he then claimed that this appearance was merely that — an outer appearance that did not go to the core of the matter. He appealed to the cognitive function of literary representation: 'If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface'.⁴¹ To accept such surface appearance as reality was the sign that one had been hoodwinked by the ideological distortions of capitalism. Precisely the failing of 'the modern literary schools of the imperialist era, from Naturalism to Surrealism, which have followed each other in such swift succession' was that 'they all remain frozen in their own immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them'.⁴² When one penetrated below this surface distortion, Lukács continued, what one found was in fact a holistic image of the present. The image might not be a pleasant one, as it would reveal all of the contradictions and injustice of the present, but it would nevertheless be a continuous and cognitively valuable image of the present as integrated totality.

This terminology of appearance and essence in Lukács's critique of Expressionism thus echoed his analysis of the outer archaism and inner modernity of Naturalism. The historical decorativism of a Naturalist novel such as *Salammbô* lent it the appearance of being an historical novel, but to accept such appearance without delving deeper was to miss its true nature as a novel of advanced bourgeois society

39 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 192; *Der historische Roman*, p. 203.

40 Ernst Bloch, 'Discussing Expressionism', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 16–27 (p. 23); 'Diskussionen über Expressionismus', in *Die Expressionismusdebatte*, pp. 180–91 (p. 187).

41 Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', p. 33. German original: 'Wenn die Literatur tatsächlich eine besondere Form der Widerspiegelung der objektiven Wirklichkeit ist, so kommt es für sie sehr darauf an, diese Wirklichkeit so zu erfassen, wie sie tatsächlich *beschaffen* ist, und sich nicht darauf zu beschränken, das wiederzugeben, was und wie es unmittelbar *erscheint*' ('Es geht um den Realismus', p. 198).

42 Lukács, 'Realism', pp. 36–37; 'Es geht um den Realismus', p. 202.

and thus to lose whatever insight could be taken from the novel. Modernist and avant-garde literature, analogously, appeared on the surface to critically analyse contemporary society by engaging with its formal chaos head on; in fact, however, what they did was merely reproduce that chaos without working through to the hidden significance. In both cases, accepting the surface claims of the artwork brought the consequence that the reader remained unaware of, and thus captive to, the deep structural split between surface and essence marring the artwork as a whole. If, however, one worked through to the deeper meaning — this penetration of surface appearance being simply a metaphor for what Lukács elsewhere termed ‘mediation’ — then that structural split itself became part of the cognitive content of the artwork.

Lukács’s theory of Naturalism thus reveals how, in his account, formal structures linked with the emergence of the post-1848 historicist consciousness continued within modernism even once the overtly historicizing gestures had disappeared. The empty, decorative historicist details of Flaubert’s *Salammô* were echoed in the profusion of (for Lukács) fragmented elements in a modernist stream of consciousness; the split between outer archaism and inner modernity in Naturalism simply deepened in Expressionism’s failure to distinguish discontinuous appearance from deeper, integral totality. In other words, the primary structures Lukács identified when criticizing the historicism of the Naturalist novel became separated from the nature of the artwork’s content: those same structures could exist in artworks that portrayed no historical content. This separation of ‘historicist’ structural flaws from the appearance of overt historical content allowed Lukács to call into question one of the fundamental pillars of the self-understanding of the avant-garde: the understanding of the avant-garde as engaging in a ruthless battle *against* historicism. While what Lukács might have termed the ‘ideology of the avant-garde’ claimed to be battling the obsolete formal languages inherited from the past and inventing a new language expressive of the present, Lukács insisted that these new languages were simply a further step along precisely the development they claimed to combat. In Lukács’s scheme, it was irrelevant that the Dadaists engaged in iconoclastic gesturing or that the Futurists called for the burning of museums. These movements remained ‘historicist’ by virtue of their deeper structure.

Realism Debate, Part Two: Teige and the Functionalist Sublime

Lukács’s depiction of avant-garde art as an outgrowth of historicism contains a counterintuitive element, for it brushes against the grain of the apparently hostile temporal connotations of ‘avant-garde’ and ‘historicism’ as oriented, respectively, towards the future and the past. Teige, by contrast, embraced those temporal connotations and presumed a genetic relation between historicism and realist art. In late 1934, for example, as left-wing intellectual circles in Prague were sounding out the implications of the ascendant Soviet literary and artistic policy of Socialist Realism, Teige composed a long article assessing the potential compatibility and relative merits of that policy vis-à-vis Surrealism, which he had only recently

come to support fully.⁴³ Although this was a period when Teige was for the most part ferociously pro-Soviet, the products of Socialist Realism fared poorly in his estimation:

In Soviet literary and artistic production we know not a single work that does not conceal under the banner of Socialist Realism the same old realist wares, the old realist descriptive methods, old realist clichés, [...] the same simple-mindedness, behind which hide artistic laziness and lies wretched form — at times drowned out by the tenor of propaganda — and mindless portrayal of the external symptoms of class struggle.⁴⁴

Anticipating the Greenbergian equation of Socialist Realism with Kitsch, Teige's rejection of 'real-existing' Socialist Realism was categorical.⁴⁵ Teige had been watching with concern the fate of Soviet avant-garde architecture since the perceived scandal of the 1932 Palace of the Soviets competition, when a regressively historicizing project won over a modernist master like Le Corbusier, and did not hesitate to see the results of Socialist Realism as literary and artistic counterparts to the eclecticizing and historicizing projects that had been dominating Soviet architecture for several years. He wrote that 'especially Soviet Socialist Realist painting is in practice drowning in the most barren, naturalistic, illustrated-magazine kitsch, while architecture walks around in academic togas, dresses itself in the Greco-Roman orders, and eclecticizes [*sic*] between antiquity, renaissance, baroque, empire, and formalist modernism'.⁴⁶ Realism, historicism, and kitsch here formed a constellation of censure that appeared self-evident, unworthy even of theoretical elaboration.

This linkage has much intuitive plausibility and places Teige within the mainstream of twentieth-century avant-garde rhetoric, which cast historicism in architecture and realism in art as characteristically retrograde nineteenth-century aesthetic positions, each too timorous to confront the challenges and uniqueness of the present. Such ideological branding may seem like the critical counterpart to collective guilt, but Teige did in fact provide a fuller theoretical account for this intertwined rejection. His linkage between historicism and realism emerged from a more complex train of logic that extended back to the early period of the Constructivism–Poetism paradigm. For one of the unique features of Teige's texts from that early period was precisely the way he framed the theoretical coherence of his dualism negatively, that is, by equating the architectural critique of *historicism* with the literary and artistic critique of *representation*.

Teige's equation of these critiques becomes visible when we revisit the early development, examined in Chapter Three, of his ideas towards tendentious art. In 1920–21 he had upheld the ideal of tendentiousness as the guarantor of art's social engagement: tendentiousness was the antidote to the great cultural weakness of

43 See Chapter One for a fuller account of Teige's gradual rapprochement with Surrealism.

44 Karel Teige, 'Socialistický realismus a surrealismus' (1935), in Teige, *Výbor*, II, 197–252 (pp. 219–20).

45 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3–21.

46 Teige, 'Socialistický realismus a surrealismus', p. 247.

the bourgeois era, the autonomy of art. By mid-1922, however, inspired by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant's Purism as well as Soviet Constructivism, Teige began to apply the architectural criterion of functionality to the full spectrum of avant-garde artistic production. As we have seen, function quickly displaced tendentiousness as aesthetic panacea: 'the *tendentiousness* of modern art is given by its *functionality*'.⁴⁷ The result of Teige's remarkably swift conversion to functionalism was a sweeping and often surprising application of architectural vocabulary to artistic production in general: '*In the new world art has a new function. It does not need to ornament or decorate life, because the beauty of life, bare and powerful, need not be concealed or disfigured by decorative adornments*'.⁴⁸ Tendentiousness rapidly transformed from weapon against artistic autonomy to despised ornamental appendage, marring artistic efficacy: 'To force tendentiousness in some external and inorganic manner on a poem, novel, sculpture or picture is just as foolish as ornamenting the bare, functional, and beautiful structure of an aeroplane hangar with nationalist trimmings'.⁴⁹

Teige thus applied the architectural terminology of functional structure versus parasitic ornament (or 'core and stylistic husk', as we saw it figured in the discourse of German modernist architecture) to the relation of form to content in other artistic media.⁵⁰ This might well seem counter-intuitive, for it is easy to think of *content* as what is given in the first instance, and of *form* as what is added on subsequently. Yet for Teige artistic content was the 'add-on', was what constituted ornamental tendentiousness, and this rendered it parasitic or insubstantial.⁵¹ The idea that manipulating artistic content had any fundamental consequence for the structural core of an artwork — a central tenet for Lukács — was for Teige equivalent to believing that the choice of a particular style of façade or ornamental vocabulary had any essential significance for a work of architecture: such an idea was 'historicist' in its focus on the superficial husk rather than the underlying structural core. In a manner similar to Lukács, therefore, Teige distanced the term 'historicism' from its original association with historical content and transformed it into a label denoting a particular, defective aesthetic configuration: one implying dishonesty, disguise, and diremption.

The denigration of content, however, did not imply a straightforward valorization of form — as the term 'formalist', a standard derogatory label used by Marxist supporters of realism against the avant-garde, presupposed. Teige wrote: 'In itself form is indifferent; it is neither beautiful nor ugly. Form stirs our sensibilities and

47 Karel Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra' (1922), in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlašín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), I, 365–81 (p. 378). Emphases in original.

48 Ibid., pp. 377–78 (emphasis in original).

49 Ibid., p. 379.

50 On 'core and husk', see Werner Oechslin, 'The Evolutionary Way to Modern Architecture: The Paradigm of *Stilhülle und Kern*', in *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, ed. by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993), pp. 363–410.

51 He wrote for example: '[Art] cannot stand ideological content, thematic tendentiousness'; Karel Teige, 'Doba a umění' [Art and the Age, 1923], in Karel Teige, *Stavba a báseň: Umění dnes a zítra* (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), pp. 24–52 (p. 45).

engages our vital responses only when coupled with a specific function'.⁵² Rather than merely shift value from one pole of the dichotomy to the other, he aimed to erase the division between the poles. The concept of function for Teige thus did more than just reveal the poverty of content-oriented aesthetics (which he often referred to by the German term *Inhaltsästhetik*): it provided a perspective that allowed one to avoid the form/content dichotomy altogether. In 1925 Teige wrote:

The functionality of art — not form, content, tendencies, or superstitions of German *Inhaltsästhetik* — is the first and most important criterion. We will not in the future waste time on abstract words concerning form and content or their relationship. A well-posed question asks what the function is. Instead of the old artistic formalism — all art, after all, was formalistic — the functionalist era posits *functionalism*. It is not concerned with form but with achieving maximal *functionality*.⁵³

Seven years later he made nearly identical claims regarding 'the *identification of form and content*', though now emphasizing more clearly the metaphor of 'surface versus deeper essence' and the contrast with the 'vulgar' Marxist charge of formalism:

[T]he usual distinctions made between content and form in architecture, painting, and literature are essentially anachronistic; they date back to the idealistic *Inhaltsästhetik* of an academically conceived, positivistic comprehension of form that nevertheless haunts vulgar Marxist interpretations of proletarian art. Such interpretations never succeed in penetrating below the surface of the subject and excuse their aversion to and ineptitude in analysing the structure of a work of art and its laws by calling such an analysis 'formal'.⁵⁴

Teige's emphasis on function as dissolver of *Inhaltsästhetik* can be understood as a further inflection of his notion of aesthetic function. The conception of function he felt was applicable to a work of art did not merely address the anthropologically conceived drives and thirst for *poesie* encountered in the previous chapter; function also identified the spot where form and content, material structure and meaning, became indistinguishable.

Teige's notion of a sublation of the form/content distinction has a long tradition in aesthetic thought, but given Teige's political and philosophical reference points no predecessor is more relevant than Marx himself. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) Marx described the curious tendency of modern revolutions to dress themselves out in costumes from earlier, 'heroic' ages:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves

52 Karel Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu' [Towards a Theory of Constructivism, 1928], in Teige, *Výbor*, 1, 360–70 (p. 367).

53 Karel Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 331–40 (p. 335) (translation modified, emphases in original). Czech original: Karel Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', in Teige, *Výbor*, 1, 129–43 (p. 135).

54 Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, trans. by Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 19 and 18, emphasis in original. Czech original: Karel Teige, *Nejmenší byt* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1932), p. 29.

and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, in turn, 1789 and the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.⁵⁵

Marx's vocabulary of costumes, disguises, and borrowed phrases, and of an anxious conjuring of 'spirits of the past', summons the spectre of historicism; but that spectre assumes most tangible form in Marx's depiction of Louis Bonaparte and the 'farcical' revolution of 1848 — the same moment Lukács identified as the birth of the historicist consciousness. In the earlier revolutions 'the awakening of the dead [...] served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given tasks in imagination, not of taking flight from their solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of the revolution, not of making its ghost walk again'. While the earlier revolutions drew on the past to embolden their present, 1848 effectively fled from its own present moment, and consequently found itself 'set back into a dead epoch'.⁵⁶ The anticipation of Lukács's understanding of historicism as impoverished consciousness of history reduced to mere decorative dross, and as the loss of any meaningful relationship between past and present, is clear. But surprisingly, Marx also cast his interpretation of revolutionary change in aesthetic terms, specifically as a particular relation of form and content. Marx contrasted the historicizing revolution of Louis Bonaparte with his own ideal of truly historical evolution:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself, before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.⁵⁷

Marx's pivot from political and historical to aesthetic categories is curious. Terry Eagleton has described Marx's account of the representational structure of socialist revolution as being motivated by the ideal of an 'aesthetic interfusion of form and content'.⁵⁸ Eagleton links this interfusion with a further aesthetic category, that of the sublime, describing Marx's image of true revolution as a 'Marxist sublime':

It is less a matter of discovering the expressive forms 'adequate to' the substance of socialism, than of rethinking that whole opposition — of grasping form no

55 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 594–617 (p. 595).

56 Ibid., p. 596.

57 Ibid., p. 597.

58 Terry Eagleton, 'The Marxist Sublime', in Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 196–233 (p. 210).

longer as the symbolic mould into which that substance is poured, but as the 'form of the content', as the structure of a ceaseless self-production.⁵⁹

In this understanding, sublimity resolves the dilemma of a form–content tension by in effect revealing form not as a stable shape for content but rather as the shifting outer contour of a content that is continually transcending its own limitations. Such self-transcending content has a most extraordinary result: in Marx's conception the socialist revolution *cannot be represented*.⁶⁰ Representation necessarily invokes predetermined forms (the masks and costumes from past ages in which bourgeois revolutions, for Marx, have clothed themselves), thus locking in the familiar form/content dichotomy. The Marxist sublime, by contrast, always remains one step ahead of its representation.

By analogy we can understand Teige's conception of the function of a work of art — of the aesthetic function — as positing a 'functionalist sublime'. The functionalist sublime characterizing the true avant-garde work of art does not 'represent an object', for that would require the imposition of predetermined form on a pre-existing content. Rather, the avant-garde work of art renounces such a reified understanding of form and content, and therefore renounces representation altogether: as Teige states, it 'represents only itself. It is not a depiction'.⁶¹ (This critique of representation is one more point of convergence between Teige's conception of avant-gardist practice and the semiotics of Prague Structuralism as formulated in particular by Mukařovský.)⁶² Equally, a work of art could not represent a broader theoretical principle, for this would violate the irreducible uniqueness, the self-transcending content, of the true work of art. Teige writes: 'Every work has its temporal order, its principle, and therefore its own aesthetic. Aesthetics can be of value only if there is a work to which its principles can relate. Theory in itself has no sense or value, only the theory of a particular work, movement or trend.'⁶³ In other words, the existence of anything external to the material constitution of the work of art, whether represented object or theoretical principle, would confound the functionalist sublime. Here lies the ultimate theoretical grounding for Teige's negative association of realism and historicism, and for his equation of the critique of representation with the critique of historicism. Realist aesthetics presupposes an object or idea that can be separated or reified from the form of its representation, and the consequent form/content dichotomy that results always produces for Teige

59 Ibid., p. 213.

60 Eagleton writes that Marx's socialist revolution 'releases the non-identical from the identical, and the question is one of how this non-identity is to represent itself'; *ibid.*, p. 215.

61 Teige, 'Doba a umění', p. 46.

62 As one critic has written: 'Because the aesthetic sign does not permit recognition, it therefore must be interpreted not instrumentally as re-presentation but as presentation. At the same time, such a semiology reveals that the basis of communication is "creation" and "production"; there are no ready-made contents whose only function is to be shared on the basis of predetermined (historical) norms'; Miroslav Petříček Jr., 'Karel Teige: Art Theory Between Phenomenology and Structuralism', in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 325–36 (pp. 331–32).

63 Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', p. 334; Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', p. 134.

an artwork that is 'ornamental' and thus, by extension, 'historicist'. The literary or artistic work that conforms to the functionalist sublime, by contrast, displaces the represented object or idea with its own sheer, material facticity, which becomes the sole source of meaning and significance of the work of art. The historicist diremptions of form and content, structure and ornament, give way to a 'sublime' functionalist holism.

A further parallel between Teige's and Lukács's logic is the presupposition of what Richard T. Gray has called 'metaphysical mimesis' (see note 16). As we have seen, Teige's fierce denunciations of traditional realism as literary and artistic method in no way prevented him from making simultaneous claims for a deeper realism inhering in the avant-garde practices unveiled by the functionalist sublime. From his earliest texts Teige had argued such claims in precisely the terms that would become so central for Lukács: the distinction between 'true' realism and a superficial, descriptive, or 'photographic' naturalism. In 1922 Teige extolled '*realism, not naturalism*. Noetic realism (direct realism [*přímý realismus*] [...]) (in contrast to the indirect, illusive, descriptive form of realism, i.e., naturalism), which, after more than four hundred years of empirical and sensual painting, is returning art to its true foundation: cognition of the real [*poznání skutečna*]'.⁶⁴ This 'direct realism' contrasted with 'descriptive naturalism' precisely in its rejection of traditional mimetic representation, as Teige made clear with his further contention that it constituted 'a higher realism of strict formal purity, of an independent and self-governing form, the true opposite of the imitative, visual, optically illusive naturalism of the descriptive and so-called "photographic" kind'.⁶⁵ Precisely by renouncing the appearance of reality, Teige's direct realism would gain a deeper cognitive power to express reality.

Both of these theoretical ideals — the 'sublime' sublation of the form/content dichotomy, and the denigration of 'photographic naturalism' in favour of 'direct realism' — were part of Šalda's legacy to Teige from early on.⁶⁶ Yet despite the seismic shifts that separate Teige's early theoretical positions from his position during Czechoslovak debates on Soviet-sanctified Socialist Realism in the mid-

64 Karel Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti' [The Art of the Present], in *Život II*, ed. by Jaromír Krejcar (Prague: Výtvarný odbor Umělecké besedy, 1922), pp. 133–34 (emphases in original).

65 Ibid., p. 134.

66 In regard to the contrast between 'direct realism' and naturalism, Teige acknowledged this debt explicitly: see *ibid.*, p. 134. Šalda had pursued a version of the form/content sublation argument as early as in his first major study, 'Synthetismus v novém umění' [Synthetism in the New Art, 1892]. The historical and cultural context of Šalda's argument, made in defence of his particular conception of 'synthetism' and symbolism, is quite distinct from Teige's, so the mapping is not exact; yet Šalda claimed that '*form disappears, but [...] transforms into expressiveness, distinctiveness, concreteness, symbolism* (which are all synonyms) ... true, real, internal, free of antinomies, apposite and integral [*integrální*]'; F. X. Šalda, 'Synthetismus v novém umění', in Šalda, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, x, 11–54 (p. 32); emphases and second ellipsis in original. Josef Vojvodík has identified the overcoming of 'the strict separation of content and form in favour of the idea of a reciprocity between the two components within the charged relationship of material and creative act' as evidence of Šalda's central importance within the tradition of Czech hermeneutics; Josef Vojvodík, 'Hermeneutics in the Czech Context (F. X. Šalda, Václav Černý, and Dimitrij Tschizewskij [Dmytro Chyzhevsky])', in *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West*, ed. by Wutsdorff, Mrugalski and Schahadat, pp. 369–80 (p. 369).

thirties, this commitment to 'direct realism' and the presupposition of a 'meta-physical mimesis' stood firm. Indeed, it underlay the most peculiar feature of Teige's preliminary response to Socialist Realism. While his 1935 article 'Socialist Realism and Surrealism' abhorred the actual Socialist Realist works being produced in the Soviet Union, Teige nonetheless felt that in theory Socialist Realism was a positive position. In all earnestness Teige claimed that a rigorous understanding of Socialist Realism would in practice encompass Surrealism: *'there is no theoretical conflict between Surrealism and Socialist Realism, and Surrealism falls within the general theoretical framework of the theory of Socialist Realism'*.⁶⁷ The notion that Socialist Realism envisaged a *synthesis* of traditional realism with modernist developments was a not uncommon delusion within the Czechoslovak response to the new policy, but Teige (together with Nezval) was extreme in his outright *equation* of Socialist Realism with Surrealism.⁶⁸ This striking equation alluded once again to the spectre of 'photographic' naturalism: 'The poetic no less than the scientific interpretation of reality is not a photographic recording; rather it utilizes its particular X-rays, microscopes and telescopes'.⁶⁹ Whereas descriptive representation merely reproduced surface appearances, 'direct socialist realism' or 'socialist surrealism' (both plausible designations for Teige's unorthodox conception) used innovative methods to reveal deeper truths and expose outer appearances as illusory: 'the gaze of Socialist Realism thus must penetrate like an X-ray into the depths of reality, and reveal in cinematographic fashion its dynamics and mutual interrelations [...]. Socialist Realism tries to be as omniscient as Vico's God, whereas realism records the outer surface of natural and social reality'.⁷⁰ One might well be forgiven if one mistakenly attributed such a quotation to Lukács, yet Teige is of course arguing on the directly opposed side of the realism debate. That Surrealism produced artistic products that did not look realistic in Lukács's more traditional sense was the sign of its cognitive power to uncover a deeper reality, just as the efficacy of X-ray pictures began precisely where they went deeper than the photographic image of a human being.

The comparison to 'X-rays, microscopes and telescopes', that is, to advanced scientific equipment, not only metaphorically defined Surrealism as the cutting edge of aesthetic technique but also reinforced the claim that the dreamlike logic of Surrealism was not 'idealist', as orthodox Communist critics claimed, but radically materialist. Surrealism's X-ray images penetrated through illusory layers (the appearances mimetic realism sought merely to imitate) to reveal the functional skeleton shaping and supporting reality, just as Functionalist architecture had stripped off ornamental layers to reveal the skeletal structure of contemporary buildings. For Teige, therefore, these two avant-garde practices, Functionalism and

67 Teige, 'Socialistický realismus a surrealismus', p. 197 (emphasis in original).

68 On the wider Czechoslovak context of this delusion, see Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu 1945–56* (Prague: Torst, 1998), p. 103. Most of those who subscribed to such beliefs (including Teige) based their interpretations on Lunacharsky's and Bucharin's rather than Zhdanov's statements on Socialist Realism.

69 Teige, 'Socialistický realismus a surrealismus', p. 238.

70 Ibid., pp. 198–99.

Surrealism with their respective critiques of historicism and mimetic representation, both engaged in a direct realism that dissolved accrued layers of obsolete meanings, superimposed patterns, and borrowed forms in order to trace sheer underlying materiality.⁷¹

While Teige thus presented (or presupposed) a plausibly coherent framework for his equation of the critiques of mimetic representation and historicism, the conceptions he used to construct this framework — direct realism and the functionalist sublime — were not entirely parallel. For they posited dynamics that pulled in opposed directions: simultaneously anti-totalizing and totalizing. On the one hand, his conception of direct realism shattered the forms, prescriptions, ideologies, and narratives traditionally imposed upon objects to make them cohere, and in this sense was radically anti-totalizing: the fragmentation of interpretive totalities disclosed the underlying discontinuities and heterogeneity of reality. Simultaneously, however, Teige's conception of the functionalist sublime constituted a radically totalizing impulse: the debilitating dualities of form and content, structure, and ornament were to give way before this integrative force.⁷² The dissolution of these dichotomies was to uncover the essential features of the present: removing the accrued sediment of historical or conventional forms would lay bare the bedrock of present reality, the identity of the present. We have noted several times in this study that Teige's totalizing rhetoric considerably complicates the common account of left-wing avant-garde aesthetics as being focused on fragmentation, hostile to totalities at all levels. The aesthetics of fragmentation was, granted, present and powerful; but the more important challenge is to understand how the anti-totalizing drive of Teige's direct realism conjoins with the totalizing moment of the functionalist sublime. Here one confronts the paradox that the rigorous demolition and demythologization of totalities was to provide cognitive access to a reality that disclosed itself as totalized.

This paradox reveals both the mutual interaction and mutual resistance of the two temporal registers discussed at the outset of this chapter. Teige's notion of direct realism operates on what above was termed a chronological register. As a confrontation with brute material conditions (functionalist architecture, the manipulation and mastery of intractable material, being the purest form of such

71 K. Michael Hays has described a similar radical realism in the Functionalism of Teige's close ally, Hannes Meyer, director of the Bauhaus from 1928 till 1930: 'Whereas humanism, in its ceaseless effort to fill the void between ourselves and the world, forever finds ways to convert things into their forms, into names, into totems, Meyer intensifies the raw materiality of the thing — the glaring brightness, the hardness, the smell, the taste — and thrusts the experience of that thing, previously indifferent and unimaginably external, toward the subject with unpadding harshness'; K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 111.

72 Indeed in his more lyrical moments Teige indicated that fundamental diremptions such as those between high and low art, science and art, or rationality and irrationality would be eliminated by a creative vision that refused to distinguish between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, between art and everyday life. See in particular Karel Teige, 'Poetism' (1924), trans. by Ian Finlay, in *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourse*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023), pp. 149–56; 'Poetismus', in Teige, *Výbor*, 1, 121–28.

confrontation) this direct realism does not celebrate so much as listen attentively and take the measure of the present. It reveals soberly where we are on the chronological scale: what possibilities are 'realistic' and appropriate for present capacities. The notion of the functionalist sublime, by contrast, operates on an epochal register. It promises qualitative difference: totalization, resolution of diremptions, and liberational potential — nothing less than a historical or indeed revolutionary change in our relation to the aesthetic. The realism debate as a whole unfolded within the field of tension between these temporal registers. In the case of Lukácsian realism, the divergence of the chronological and the epochal registers is evident: Lukács's claim for realism as the chronological state of twentieth-century literature, which appears to most interpreters as the application of an anachronistic aesthetic ideal to the present, has retained few adherents. Teige presented a more convincing case for the convergence of the chronological and epochal temporal registers. But the simultaneously totalizing and anti-totalizing moments of his rhetoric are symptomatic not of convergence but of tension.

The realism debate thus represents more than a straightforward conflict between 'realistic' and 'non-realistic' art, or between content- and form-based aesthetics, or between any of the various antipodes that are generated so readily from its terms. Rather, it played out a paradox implicit in a particular aspiration of modern temporality: the desire to superimpose an epochal register on top of the chronological register of the present. The threat of historicism was thus a necessary element of the realism debate. For historicism designated the disjuncture of the chronological and the epochal, that is, precisely the opposite of what realism — however that might be conceptualized — was supposed to reveal. In a later context Fredric Jameson defined the postmodern 'as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place'.⁷³ The realism debate expresses the inverse: the attempt to think unhistorically (or chronologically) in an age that did not yet know how to think other than historically (in epochs).

73 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. ix.

PART IV



History and Holism:
Teige and Benjamin

CHAPTER 7



Vanishing Points: The Liquidations of Aura

The Aura of Originality

The vanishing of the aura is Walter Benjamin's most celebrated postulate not only in his most celebrated essay, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' [The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility], henceforth the 'Work of Art essay', but indeed anywhere in his writings. Even stating this fact became long ago a mechanical gesture. Over forty years ago Werner Fuld claimed that 'it seems precisely this most inaccessible of Benjamin's ideas has entered the speech (although not the thinking) reproduced daily by culture mavens [*Kulturbeflissene*], as if Benjamin lived on in this single concept'.¹ The Work of Art essay has often been characterized as 'a scandal and a provocation', as overturning established aesthetic beliefs so radically as to achieve epochal status.² An influential history of German literature, for example, has described Benjamin's theses as 'terrifying', 'bordering on heresy', and as 'shred[ding] the fabric of the most cherished beliefs about art', and even unabashedly hostile commentators have felt compelled to pay 'homage [...] to the essay's originality'.³ Benjamin himself encourages such a view when, at the outset of the essay, he claims to provide 'new concepts for the theory of art' and, in a letter to his friend Werner Kraft, claimed to be 'the first to have discovered some fundamental principles of a materialist art theory'; elsewhere Benjamin expresses anxiety lest his ideas be stolen before he

1 Werner Fuld, 'Die Aura: Zur Geschichte eines Begriffes bei Benjamin', *Akzente*, 26 (1979), 352–70 (p. 353). See also Burkhardt Lindner, 'Benjamins Aurakonzeption: Anthropologie und Technik, Bild und Text', in *Walter Benjamin 1892–1940, zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. by Uwe Steiner (Berne: Lang, 1992), pp. 217–48 (p. 217).

2 Michael W. Jennings, 'The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art', in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Michael Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 9–18 (p. 14).

3 Lindsay Waters, 'The Machine Takes Command', in *A New History of German Literature*, ed. by David E. Wellbery (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 790–95 (p. 791); Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, 'How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once — and Become Famous for It', in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 91–97 (p. 91).

has had the chance to publish them.⁴ The consensus regarding the importance and originality of Benjamin's account of the decline of aura has helped make the Work of Art essay 'probably the most frequently cited and most intensely debated essay in the history of the academic humanities of the twentieth century'.⁵

Nonetheless, the intense fascination generated by the Work of Art essay has engendered a continual re-forgetting of what should be an obvious fact: Benjamin's major theses are brilliantly formulated and occupy a crucial position in the larger edifice of his thought, but they are hardly original. The term 'aura' may be Benjamin's, but the idea of its vanishing is not. Both Benjamin's and later commentators' fixation on the originality of his conception of the decline of aura exemplify an ambition that Françoise Meltzer has described as a problematic obsession: 'the pursuit of originality, the fear of being robbed of a "new" idea, the drive to be first, even the work ethic itself are symptoms of a gendered theology of origin'.⁶ In place of strident claims for originality one might rather speculate that part of what has made the Work of Art essay a touchstone for debates on modern, postmodern, and contemporary aesthetics is the way Benjamin gave conceptual depth to claims that were becoming commonplace even when he completed the first version of the essay in late 1935. To acknowledge this is by no means to question the importance of Benjamin's text. But it should warn against uncritical identification of Benjamin's 'liquidationist claims' as the site of the essay's originality.⁷ Claims that modern society was eroding or 'liquidating' the aesthetic categories traditionally used to define art as a discrete and privileged practice had been raised forcefully over at least the decade and a half preceding Benjamin's text. The Work of Art essay should thus be read as responding to that discourse, rather than being its culmination, let alone inventing it.⁸

4 This phrase appears in all three extant German versions of the essay: see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), first version: I, 432–69 (p. 435); third version: I, 471–508 (p. 473); and second version: VII, 350–84 (p. 350) (this edition henceforth 'GS'). An English translation of the second version, which I will cite throughout, is contained in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996–2003), III, 101–22 (p. 102, translation modified) (this edition henceforth 'SW'). For the late October 1935 letter to Kraft, see GS, I, 984; translated in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 516 (hereafter 'CWB'). The anxiety over intellectual property is expressed in a letter to Gershom Scholem; see GS, I, 983; CWB, p. 514.

5 'Editors' Preface', in *Mapping Benjamin*, ed. by Gumbrecht and Marriman, pp. xiii–xvi (p. xiii).

6 Françoise Meltzer, *Hot Property: The Stakes and Claims of Literary Originality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 7.

7 In her magisterial analysis of the Work of Art essay, Miriam Bratu Hansen also questions 'the liquidationist tenor of the essay [...] and, by implication, the facile reproduction of this tenor in the essay's standard reception'; see Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 83.

8 This only includes arguments connecting the decline of aura to developments in technological reproduction. If one also includes 'idealist' versions of the thesis then the tradition is far older: as Jürgen Habermas pointed out, 'Hegel already announced the loss of aura in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*'; Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', trans. by Frederick Lawrence, in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. by Gary Smith

Few thinkers had pursued this liquidationist discourse as systematically as had Teige. We have already seen how central Teige's liquidationist discourse was to his thinking from the early 1920s onwards, and it anticipates in striking ways many of Benjamin's claims. Beyond that, Teige's thought also sheds light on the often fundamentally opposed positions Benjamin set forth in other texts written more or less simultaneously with the Work of Art essay — and which interpreters have frequently felt compelled to regard as expressing nostalgia for the auratic work of art. Tracing the extent of Benjamin's reliance upon established liquidationist claims in the Work of Art essay is not an exercise in debunking. Rather, such contextualization allows more precise identification of Benjamin's relation to this avant-garde discourse, and greater understanding of how what has often been deemed nostalgia might actually be veiled critique of some of the liquidationist theses the Work of Art essay is so often understood to herald.

Claims for the epoch-making status of the Work of Art essay usually emphasize its prognostic value: how the essay forecast developments extending well beyond Benjamin's own present. The focus on prognosis may seem natural — after all, Benjamin himself wrote of the 'prognostic requirements' of the essay.⁹ Nonetheless, broader contextualization provides grounds for understanding the main analytic gesture of the essay less as *prognosis* of the future and more as *diagnosis* of Benjamin's present. One can cite Benjamin in support of this approach as well: in letters to colleagues Benjamin repeatedly described the essay as forensic rather than forecast. The essay, he wrote, traced the 'signature' of its present and aspired to the 'precise establishment of the standpoint of the present'.¹⁰

Reading the Work of Art essay as a diagnostic rather than prognostic document brings several advantages. First, it avoids attributing to the essay a model of continuous temporal extension into the future that is inseparable from the concept of prognosis and that Benjamin systematically critiques as an ideology of 'progress' elsewhere in his work. Second, it allows a more nuanced formulation of how the essay combines celebratory and critical stances towards the developments it describes (often understood as revealing a fundamental contradiction or ambivalence in Benjamin's thought). Third, it avoids attributing to the essay primacy for liquidationist claims that were already well established at the time it was written. By championing claims that constituted the *Jüngstvergangene*, or recent past of avant-garde theory, the Work of Art essay acknowledges simultaneously the efficacy and the historical boundedness of the liquidationist position. In this and the following chapter, I will argue that Benjamin's formulations in the Work of Art essay are best understood as a form of what he elsewhere called a *Wunschbild*, or wish image, belonging to his own moment in history. Because the wish image of the vanishing aura characterizes the present in which the Work of Art essay is embedded, Benjamin himself cannot escape its seductive power. Yet as wish image

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 90–128 (p. 103).

9 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 101; 'Kunstwerk', p. 350.

10 Letters to Max Horkheimer of 16 October 1935 and to Werner Kraft of 27 December 1935, in *CWB*, pp. 509 and 517, respectively, translation modified; *GS*, 1, 983 and 984.

it also marks that moment as historically determined and thus inherently partial. The liquidationist claims that the essay is so often taken to originate, therefore, function less as materialist prognosis of a destination just visible on the horizon of the future, and more as diagnosis of a thought-pattern of Benjamin's present: a wish image that no thinker (or at least none unburdened by regressive ideals) could avoid, including Benjamin himself. This sense of the unavoidability of the wish image lends the Work of Art essay celebratory and critical vectors that are not contradictory but rather self-reflexive.

The interpretive perspective I propose here is neatly expressed in an image Benjamin used to describe the relation of the Work of Art essay to his other work, especially the vast historical construction undertaken in *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*): 'The issue this time is to indicate the precise point in the present to which my historical construction will orient itself, as to its vanishing point'.¹¹ This image of the vanishing point is curious, for it presumes a counterintuitive relation between foreground and background. One does not look through the foreground of the present out into the background of the past (as a more traditional image of the historical gaze would posit) nor does one look through the foreground of the present out into the future emerging on the distant horizon (as the image of prognosis or progress would require). Rather, historical 'background' forms Benjamin's foreground; and the present, that which is temporally closest, is located in the background, at the vanishing point. If it is true that 'Benjamin thinks in images [*Bildern*]',¹² it is equally true that aspects of Benjamin's thought can be grasped mimetically through images that Benjamin himself invoked only fleetingly. The following discussion will explore the diagnosis of the wish image inherent in the Work of Art essay through the conceptual figure of the vanishing point: a point marking both a hypothetical state in which aura has vanished, as well as Benjamin's critical distance from the liquidationist thought-patterns of his own present.



Much has been written on Benjamin's sources for the concept of the aura. The term clearly echoes the discourse on 'human aura' in *fin-de-siècle* spiritual and spiritualist movements (such as theosophy and anthroposophy, which Benjamin abhorred), of early Romantic or older notions of the 'beautiful appearance' (*schöner Schein*), or even of medieval mysticism and the Kabbalah.¹³ Commentators have traced earlier

11 From the same letter to Max Horkheimer, in *CWB*, p. 509; *GS*, 1, 983.

12 Ansgar Hillach, 'Dialektisches Bild', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitez and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 186–229 (p. 189).

13 See, e.g., Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, Ch. 4; Josef Fürnkäs, 'Aura', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Opitez and Wizisla, pp. 95–146; Fuld, 'Die Aura'; Wolfgang Braungart, 'Walter Benjamin, Stefan George, und die Frühgeschichte des Begriffs der Aura', *Castrum Peregrini*, 46.230 (1997), 38–51; Gary Smith, 'A Genealogy of "Aura": Walter Benjamin's Idea of Beauty', in *Artifacts, Representations, and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wartofsky*, ed. by Carol G. Gould and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 105–19; Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1983); Birgit Recki, *Aura und Autonomie: Zur Subjektivität der Kunst bei Walter Benjamin und Theodor W. Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1988); Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, 'Formen und Metamorphosen der Aura', in

appearances of the concept in Benjamin's work from the 1920s.¹⁴ Benjamin's particular use of the concept 'aura' thus emerges from a long-standing theological tradition that gives the term an immediate ring, an intuitive clarity. This might suggest that, at least in part, the originality of Benjamin's essay lies less in the concept of aura itself than in his application of the term to aesthetics and in his claim about its vanishing under modern technological conditions.¹⁵

Yet even here precursors are evident. For one thing, Benjamin 'had happily stolen' on a broad level from Romantic and post-Romantic nostalgic discourses on lost aesthetic harmony; indeed it has even been suggested that Benjamin was specifically influenced by conservative critiques of mechanized culture during the First World War.¹⁶ Benjamin's essay, however, is far less pessimistic about cultural change under modernity than such sources. Thus it is rather the interwar avant-garde movements such as Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism, with their exploration and celebration of the non-auratic tendencies of the modern work of art, that appear more plausible an influence on Benjamin.¹⁷ These movements represented various forms of 'attack on [...] the very notion of art as an institution' in an attempt to 'shed the aesthetic construction of art'.¹⁸ Benjamin himself described Dada in the essay as a major precursor for the idea of the withering of aesthetic aura due to its attempt to create effects that would be fully achieved only later

Das Schwinden der Sinne, ed. by Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 75–86; and Hans Robert Jauß, 'Spur und Aura: Bemerkungen zu Walter Benjamins "Passagen-Werk"', in *Studien zur Epochenwandel der ästhetischen Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp), pp. 189–215.

14 The most important are 'Little History of Photography' (*SW*, II, 507–28; 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', *GS*, II, 368–85) and the report on hashish ('Hashish, Beginning of March 1930', *SW*, II, 327–30; 'Haschisch Anfang März 1930', *GS*, VI, 587–91).

15 Hansen, however, argues that the 'narrowly aesthetic understanding of aura' has impoverished the concept, and that only attention to the wider resonance of the term allows understanding the role of the term in Benjamin's theory of modern experience (*Cinema and Experience*, p. 104).

16 Robert Kaufman, 'Aura, Still', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 121–47 (p. 122). Arnd Bohm has argued that an early essay in *Kulturkritik* by Adolf Behne influenced Benjamin; see Arnd Bohm, 'Artful Reproduction: Benjamin's Appropriation of Adolf Behne's "Das reproduktive Zeitalter" in the *Kunstwerk-Essay*', *The Germanic Review*, 68 (1993), 146–55.

17 In Petr Málek's words, the 'epoch-making importance [of the Work of Art essay] should not [...] obscure the fact that the problem of the mechanical/mass (re)production of a work of art, while grasped here in all its complexity and contradictions, had occupied the minds of avant-garde artists and theorists ever since the 1910s'; Petr Málek, 'Mass (re)production', in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-Garde: Conceptions of Aesthetics and the Changing Faces of Art 1908–1958*, ed. by Petr A. Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Jan Wiendl, trans. by David Short (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), pp. 263–82 (p. 264). See also Krzysztof Ziarek, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Electronic Mutability', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, pp. 209–25; Dietrich Scheunemann, 'On Photography and Painting: Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde', in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 15–48 (p. 26); John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 160–61; Michael Müller, *Architektur und Avantgarde: ein vergessenes Projekt der Moderne?* (Frankfurt a.M.: Syndikat, 1984), pp. 98–147; as well as the references in notes 20, 21 and 24 below.

18 Ziarek, 'The Work of Art', p. 212.

through the new medium of film. But if Dada intuitively anticipated the ‘ruthless annihilation of the aura’, other avant-garde innovators not discussed in the *Work of Art* essay enacted quite consciously much of what that text analyses.¹⁹ In particular, many figures associated with International Constructivism adhered to the ideal of, and produced radical strategies for carrying out, non-auratic cultural production.²⁰ A telling example is the pair of ‘telephone pictures’ László Moholy-Nagy produced in 1922, titled ‘EM 1’ and ‘EM 2’. To make these works Moholy-Nagy simply gave instructions to a sign painter over the telephone, specifying coordinates and tones of colour fields, which were then printed in enamel on a steel sheet as if on a piece of graph paper. The elimination of authorial intervention, the anti-auratic nature, and the immanence of technological reproducibility to this procedure are clear.²¹

Benjamin’s theory of the decline of auratic art thus took fundamental inspiration from the waves of revolt against aesthetic autonomy produced by the historical avant-garde movements before, during and immediately following the First World War. While the importance of these precedents is conspicuous, commentators have rarely noted the time-lag between the precedent and Benjamin’s essay itself.²² Yet given that Benjamin’s account of the decline of aura as a result of technological reproducibility has been traced back to sources from the early 1920s or mid-1910s (if not earlier), it is clear that the originality of Benjamin’s claims in 1935 cannot lie in the liquidationist moments of the essay, as is so often maintained. Attempts to deepen our understanding of Benjamin’s interest during the mid-1920s in the European avant-garde, and its effect on the shape of his work, offer some clarification here, since they reveal that Benjamin was himself active (albeit

19 Benjamin, *SW*, III, 119; *GS*, VII, 379.

20 Frederic J. Schwartz writes that ‘ideas of the kind central to the *Artwork* essay’s distracted, productive expert were clearly quite current already in the 1920s among a certain group of artists’; Frederic J. Schwartz, ‘The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant-Garde’, *Art History*, 24 (2001), 401–44 (p. 412). And in Eckhardt Köhn’s words, ‘the theme Benjamin takes up of the technical reproduction of works of art is an old theme of Constructivism’; Eckhardt Köhn, ‘“Nichts gegen die Illustrierte!”: Benjamin, der Berliner Konstruktivismus, und das avantgardistische Objekt’, in *Schrift Bilder Denken: Walter Benjamin und die Künste*, ed. by Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 48–69 (p. 64).

21 Krisztina Passuth claims that these telephone pictures ‘obviously provided inspiration for Walter Benjamin’s [*Work of Art*] essay dating from a slightly later period’; Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 33. See also Schwartz, ‘The Eye of the Expert’, p. 428. Manfredo Tafuri, without discussing the telephone pictures, associates Moholy-Nagy’s ‘technological utopia’ with Benjamin’s *Work of Art* essay; see Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. by Pellegrino d’Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 142–43. Moholy-Nagy’s 1922 essay on ‘Production-Reproduction’ also foreshadows elements of both the *Work of Art* essay and Benjamin’s ‘The Author as Producer’ (1935); Krisztina Passuth’s translation of this essay is contained in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. by Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 454–55.

22 Peter Bürger’s classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) set an example for discussing Benjamin in the context of avant-garde movements such as Dada without reflecting on the time-lag between them. Ziarek (pp. 211–14) represents a more recent example. Passuth also glosses over the thirteen-year gap between Moholy-Nagy’s telephone pictures and the *Work of Art* essay (see previous note).

peripherally) in some of the movements that inspired his later essay.²³ More recent scholarship has focused attention, for example, on Benjamin's contacts with the G-Group in Berlin, on his publications in the avant-garde revue *i10*, and on his incorporation of avant-garde techniques into works like *Einbahnstrasse* [*One-Way Street*].²⁴ Yet the question remains regarding the belatedness of Benjamin's theory of the decline of aura.²⁵

Benjamin himself proposes a resolution. He implies that his reflections in the *Work of Art* essay represent a qualitatively different phase from the earlier avant-garde movements. While Dada may have anticipated the developments described in his essay, it did so largely in ignorance of the forces to which it was responding. Dada enacted one of the first overt manifestations of the decline of aura, but — like

23 This interest may originate even earlier since, according to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin was neighbour to and met with Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings in Berne in 1917–19; see Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 101. As Detlev Schöttker points out, this early contact with Zurich Dadaists would likely have made Benjamin receptive to the Dada movement emerging in Berlin on his return, and consequently to the Berlin Dadaists' propagation of Russian and International Constructivism; see Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus: Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 152–53 and 159. This early (and short-lived) alliance between Dada and Constructivism culminated in the International Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists in September 1922 in Weimar.

24 See in particular the editors' introduction in *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design and Film, 1923–1926*, ed. by Detlef Mertins and Michael W. Jennings (London: Tate, in association with the Getty Research Institute, 2010), pp. 3–20 (esp. pp. 8 and 16); Frederic J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), Ch. 2, esp. pp. 39–51; Michael Jennings, 'Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-Garde', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 18–34; Köhn, "'Nichts gegen die Illustrierte!'"'; Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert'; Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus*, esp. pp. 156–72; Detlev Schöttker, 'Reduktion und Montage: Benjamin, Brecht, und die konstruktivistische Avantgarde', in *global benjamin 2*, ed. by Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1999), pp. 745–73 (esp. pp. 750–51).

25 Hansen argues that Benjamin practised a 'tactical belatedness' by reaching back to a moment of unrealized potential before the mastery of false auratic culture by Fascism and the 'surrendering [of] important Marxist positions' by the Popular Front: 'It is *because* Benjamin was so acutely aware of the politically and aesthetically retrograde and dangerous uses of the technological media [...] that he resumed the perspective of the 1920s avantgarde' (*Cinema and Experience*, pp. 87, 77, and 88). This may be true, but underplays what I will argue is a critical re-evaluation implicit in Benjamin's return to this earlier moment. Maria Gough also discusses 'Benjamin's belatedness' in 'Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde', *October*, 101 (2002), 53–83 (esp. pp. 76–83), and in turn cites Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 275, note 4. Gough's discussion, however, pertains to 'The Author as Producer' and addresses the belatedness question through historical contextualization specific to that essay. The *Work of Art* essay's belatedness as film theory has been noted: Eva Geulen writes that 'Benjamin's text arrives relatively late in the history of the theory of film' ('Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"', in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Gerhard Richter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 121–41 (p. 122)); and Lutz Koepnick points out that Benjamin's formulations are 'curiously out of synch with the developments of film technology' (specifically the rise of the sound picture) (*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 143).

all true action — this occurred spontaneously and, as it were, blindly in the heat of the moment. By contrast, Benjamin implies, his Work of Art essay represents the intellectual mastery of that originary moment: a phase of reflection that became possible ‘only now’, once the incipient historical vector to which Dada responded revealed its true direction through the development of film as a medium.²⁶ Benjamin states that Dada’s prescient aspirations ‘in the form described here are not, of course, conscious ones’.²⁷ The Work of Art essay, therefore, represents the coming to consciousness of what, in Dada and other historical avant-garde movements, constituted an unconscious, instinctively felt response to changes in relations of production. Such a scheme of originary action versus conscious reflection relativizes Benjamin’s debts to the historical avant-garde by attributing primacy to him at least in theoretical elaboration. This scheme may well represent an unspoken academic consensus on the avant-garde precedents for the Work of Art essay.²⁸ Yet if one pauses to examine just how far the theoretical or reflective phase of the avant-garde attack on aesthetic autonomy had in fact reached by the early 1920s, then even this scheme appears shaky.

This is where Teige acquires particular relevance. While Teige’s texts neither attain nor aspire to the philosophical heft of Benjamin’s, Teige’s theoretical writings from the early 1920s onwards anticipated many of the central claims of Benjamin’s Work of Art essay. The point of presenting Teige in this context is certainly not to claim that Benjamin was scooped by fourteen years or so, and thus to transfer the aureole of originality from a canonical to a lesser-known figure. Teige himself made no claim to originality. He saw himself as a discursive analyst, synthesizer, and propagator of international trends that were already widespread by the early 1920s, freely adopting ideas and slogans from other figures (for example from Soviet Constructivists active in Berlin such as El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, who themselves were transmitting and transforming currents from Moscow). That Teige felt his major claims were becoming widely established (at least among ‘progressive’ figures), however, is precisely the point. Accordingly, the following section of this chapter will examine several of Teige’s early texts in order to recover more of the conceptual field of early International Constructivism and show that many of the most famous claims in the Work of Art essay appear (albeit in less resonant form) in Teige’s texts of the early and mid-1920s. Chapter Eight will then examine where Benjamin’s thought departs from the liquidationist line put forward by Teige, drawing conclusions for interpreting the Work of Art essay.

26 Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 101; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 350.

27 Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 118; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 379; translation modified.

28 Andreas Huyssen’s influential account accepts Benjamin’s own explanation that ‘it took much longer for the production relations of capitalist society to make an impact on the superstructure than it took them to prevail at the basis, so much longer that they could only be analyzed in the 1930s’; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 153.

The Liquidations of Aura

There is no evidence that Benjamin and Teige knew, let alone engaged with, each other's work. The closest their names seem to have come during their lifetimes was in the pages of the short-lived avant-garde journal *G*. Hans Richter, the driving force behind the journal, wrote a brief gloss on Prague, Teige, and Devětsil's breakthrough anthology *Život II* ('I know of no illustrated book that is more abreast of its time', wrote Richter) which appeared on the page directly preceding Benjamin's translation of a short essay on photography by Tristan Tzara.²⁹ Although there is no evidence of direct contact, Benjamin and Teige did share a constellation of intellectual orientation points and sources of inspiration. Moholy-Nagy (active for a time in the *G*-Group and then in the journal *ifo*) went on to become a central figure in the Bauhaus after 1923. As we have seen, not only did Teige observe developments in the Bauhaus closely, but when Teige's friend Hannes Meyer became director in 1928 Teige was among the guest lecturers whom Meyer soon invited to the Bauhaus to help cultivate this new, sober orientation — the logical positivists Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, and Hans Reichenbach were also among the better-known guests — and as external *Dozent* Teige delivered a lecture cycle in Dessau in early 1930 on the sociology of architecture.³⁰ A book by Teige entitled *Tschechische Kunst* never materialized but was part of the original publication plan that Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius drew up for the series of 'Bauhausbücher' in the mid-1920s, which included titles by figures such as Kandinsky, van Doesburg, Malevich, and Mondrian, as well as Moholy-Nagy's important book *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (1925).³¹ Benjamin was fascinated not only by the Bauhaus but also by the modernist architectural theories of Siegfried Giedion and Adolf Behne, as well as by the ideal of glass architecture as described by the science fiction author Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915).³² Teige's own work on architectural theory was more austere than the

29 See *G*, ed. by Martins and Jennings, pp. 140–41.

30 Teige's course on material and technical innovations in contemporary literature, poetry and typography, planned for the 1930 autumn semester, did not take place due to Meyer's forced resignation. On Teige and Meyer, see Chapter One, p. 42. On the philosophers' visits to Dessau, see Peter Galison, 'Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism', *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 709–52 (pp. 718–20).

31 On Teige's planned contribution to the 'Bauhausbücher', see Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 43. Benjamin quoted Moholy-Nagy's pronouncements on photography at some length in his 'Little History of Photography' (pp. 523 and 527; 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', pp. 382 and, unattributed, p. 385). See also Brigid Doherty, 'Photography, Typography, and the Modernization of Reading', in *A New History of German Literature*, pp. 733–38 (esp. pp. 733–34); Frederic Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert', p. 403; and Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 3.

32 See, e.g., Heinz Brüggeman, 'Walter Benjamin und Siegfried Giedion oder die Wege der Modernität', in *global benjamin 2*, ed. by Garber and Rehm, pp. 717–44; Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 103–19; Tyrus Miller, '"Glass Before its Time, Premature Iron": Architecture, Temporality and Dream in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*', in *Walter Benjamin and 'The Arcades Project'*, ed. by Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 240–58; Detlef Mertins, 'The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass', in *Assemblage*, 29 (1996), 7–23; Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), Ch. 6; McCole, *Walter Benjamin and*

version of the avant-garde discourse that interested Benjamin (in particular Teige would have had little sympathy for Benjamin's interest in Scheerbart), but there is a more specific connection here as well: as Jean-Louis Cohen has described, Teige maintained a significant correspondence with both Giedion and, in particular, Behne.³³ Finally, both had to work through a period of initial scepticism before becoming favourably disposed towards Surrealism. Thus Benjamin and Teige shared on the one hand an interest in architectural functionalism and its broader impact through the various cultural inflections of Constructivism, and on the other hand an interest in Surrealism that is initially hesitant yet increasingly powerful as the 1920s drew to a close.

While these scattered intellectual analogies may suggest no more than a general milieu of shared concerns, examination of Teige's early texts reveals more specific parallels. In 1925 Teige published a major essay called 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"'. The very title reveals Teige's interest in identifying the concerns of International Constructivism with what Benjamin in the *Work of Art* essay would call the 'the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage'.³⁴ Teige's description of a contemporary liquidation of art made no claim to originality but merely reflected theoretically on what he saw enacted by avant-garde circles in Moscow, Berlin, and elsewhere. He did, however, perceive an epochal shift in how culture was being produced: 'Constructivism cannot signify for us some temporary aesthetic and artistic fashion [... It is] an international, all-encompassing movement [...], a springboard for the new culture and civilization'.³⁵ The primary characteristic of this emerging era, Teige claimed, is that it transforms the category of art so radically that the very word becomes practically unusable. Teige put the word 'art' in scare quotes in the title of his essay and emphasized that the term must not be understood in its standard sense: 'If today we still use and will continue to use the word *art* as a terminological aid, one must note that it does not signify sacred and exalted Art with a capital A [...] that the modern era has unseated from its throne'.³⁶ Disparaging the quasi-religious rhetoric he felt usually accompanied aesthetic discourse, Teige described Constructivism as

Antinomies of Tradition, pp. 184–85 and 229–30; and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 124–31.

33 Cohen, 'Introduction', in Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 1–55 (pp. 27, 34, and 44). See also Rostislav Švácha, 'Before and After the Mundaneum: Teige as Theoretician of the Architectural Avant-Garde'; Eric Dluhosch, 'Teige's Minimum Dwelling as a Critique of Modern Architecture'; and Klaus Spechtenhauser and Daniel Weiss, 'Karel Teige and the CIAM: The History of a Troubled Relationship', all in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 106–39, 140–93, and 216–55, respectively.

34 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 104; 'Kunstwerk', p. 354.

35 Karel Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 331–40 (p. 331); Karel Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 129–43 (p. 129).

36 Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', p. 331, translation modified; Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', p. 130.

the liberation of art from theological functions and its emergence from the clouds of cultic veneration. He wrote: 'We assign art no sacral or cultic sublimity, we do not surround it with the smoke of holy incense'.³⁷ The liquidation of art, therefore, returns it to solid ground: spectral images and holy haze give way to tangible, functional products. Several years earlier Teige had invoked Ehrenburg's formulation that 'the new art is not art', but in this essay he offered a redemptive re-definition of the term: 'For us the word "art" [umění] originates in the verb "to be able" [umět] and its product is an ability [umělost], an artefact. [...] Art is simply a way of using particular means in a particular function, and both the function and the means are more or less variable entities'.³⁸ Constructivism, in short, made art once again useful — a tool to be grasped and applied towards the improvement of everyday life. Teige thus invoked classic Marxist rhetoric for de-bunking aesthetic fetishism: Constructivism extracts the rational kernel from the mystical shell. It is not difficult to see in Teige's image of what Constructivism liquidates — the cultic cloud of 'holy incense' keeping traditional works of art at reverential remove — the hazy outline of Benjamin's notion of aura.

The transformation of art that drove Teige to his etymological reinvention of the term — which was in fact more a return to the Ancient Greek meaning of *technē*, combining the senses of 'art', 'skill', 'technique', and 'craft' — was fundamentally related to technological developments and, above all, to technological reproducibility. In 1922 he wrote in one of his first major essays: 'Painting is not religion [...] it is primarily a craft [řemeslem]. And as a craft it cannot ignore the impact of mechanical reproduction. It may be assumed that some day in an egalitarian socialist society pictures will be duplicated [rozmnožovány] by machine; this is already occurring partially through reproductions, which, more than originals, mediate the artistic-cultural relations of today'.³⁹ This passage — practically simultaneous with Moholy-Nagy's telephone pictures — retains in part a traditional vocabulary of artistic production in its understanding of mechanical reproduction as a craftsman's tool. But the conception of mechanical reproduction quickly proved stronger than such remnants. Less than a year later, in his essay 'Malířství a poesie' [Painting and Poesie] introducing the picture-poem (*obrazová báseň*), all references to art as handicraft disappeared, as if chased away by the technical requirements and innovative possibilities of this experimental genre:

Sooner or later this fusion [of traditional genres in the picture-poem] is likely to bring about the *liquidation* (even if gradual) of traditional methods of painting and poetry. *Picture-poems completely conform to contemporary requirements.* Mechanical reproduction allows pictures to take *book form*. [...] Mechanical reproduction will bring about the popularization [*zlidovění*] of art securely and on a mass scale. The *press* [Tisk], not museums or exhibitions, mediates between

37 Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', p. 332, translation modified; Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', p. 130.

38 Teige, 'Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art"', p. 332, Teige's emphases in original; Teige, 'Konstruktivismus a likvidace "umění"', p. 130.

39 Karel Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra' [Art Today and Tomorrow], in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, ed. by Jaroslav Seifert (Prague: Večernice, 1922), pp. 187–202 (p. 196).

artistic production and spectators. The old type of exhibition is dying out, for it too strongly resembles a gallery-like mausoleum. The modern exhibition must be a bazaar (a trade fair, a world exhibition). [...] Mechanical reproduction and the press will ultimately make originals useless — after all, we throw manuscripts into the waste-paper basket after they have been printed.⁴⁰

Here Teige not only embraced the new media (the press and typographic pictures published in book form) that technological reproduction opened up and that he felt were bringing art objects closer to the masses: he was already stating in 1923 that technological reproduction made the very notion of an original obsolete — one of Benjamin's central and most celebrated claims.⁴¹

Teige's comments on the transformations instigated by modern forms of exhibition (forms such as the bazaar or the trade fair) further anticipate Benjamin's distinction between cult value and exhibition value in the *Work of Art* essay. Both authors describe the origin of art in religious ritual and see analogous cultic functions extending in secularized form into late nineteenth-century Aestheticism. In both accounts, cultic art in all its historical forms seeks out tight, inaccessible spaces: Teige wrote of the mausoleum, Benjamin of prehistoric caves and the inner sancta of Greek temples or medieval cathedrals. Benjamin wrote that 'Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight'.⁴² The viewing of such art thus becomes either initiatory rite or confirmation of privilege. This is why both Teige and Benjamin describe the trend towards exhibition value in modern art as the emancipation or release of art, the opening up of such spaces of religious or aesthetic control and, therefore, as the counterpart to a broader egalitarian or progressive political shift.

The political implications of this shift from cult to exhibition value also explain why Teige associated technological reproduction with a process of popularization.⁴³ Rather than seeing technology's intrusion into the realm of the aesthetic as a form of de-humanization or alienation, Teige emphasized that this shift in fact brought art (with all the caveats he attaches to the term) closer to the masses. There are

40 Karel Teige, 'Malířství a poezie', in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlášin, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), I, 496, emphases in original.

41 One of the most famous picture-poems — the cover image for the 1922 anthology *Život II*, co-designed by Teige with several other members of Devětsil (see Fig. 1.3) — was reproduced in 1924 in the journal *G*. Richter's gloss on Teige and the Prague avant-garde (on the page facing Benjamin's translation of Tzara's article), relays Teige's basic understanding of the function of the picture-poem: 'the title page of *Život* [sic] illustrated on p. 23 belongs to a series of Teige's "picture poems" that he, tired of the senselessness of oil painting — has produced for reproductive techniques in the framework of the book' (in *G*, p. 140). To speculate that Benjamin might have reflected upon this a decade later is perhaps too bold; yet it should be noted that the *Work of Art* essay does echo other concepts from *G*, such as Richter's term 'optical unconscious'; see Mertins and Jennings's introduction in *G*, p. 16.

42 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 106; 'Kunstwerk', p. 358.

43 The Czech term Teige uses for popularization (*zlidovění*) occupies the semantic field explored in Chapter Three: it generally implies 'proletarianization', but for Teige also connotes popularization in the consumerist sense (as in 'popular culture') and indeed a process of 'humanization'. The central morpheme, *lid*, means 'people' both in the narrow sense of a nation and the wider sense of humanity in general (*lidstvo*).

several aspects to his argument. The first is the obvious fact that technology enabled broader, faster, and more thorough distribution of cultural products to the public (via reproductions and the like, or through the use of picture-poems on book covers acting as 'posters' for the book). But the more interesting aspect of Teige's notion of a popularization of culture involved the transformation inaugurated in art by its increased social proximity to the masses. Teige was less interested in the cultural edification of the masses than in the massification of culture; indeed, he was among the earliest theorists of the interwar avant-garde to embrace mass culture wholeheartedly. We have seen how in 1922 he extolled 'westerns, Buffalo Bill stories, Nick Carter adventures, sentimental novels, American movie serials and Chaplin's slapstick, amateur comedy theatre, jugglers, minstrels, clowns and acrobatic circus riders, Springtime folk celebrations, a Sunday football match' and claimed that 'these literary forms [odrůdy] — many of you will say: deformities [zrůdy] — are nowadays the one and most characteristic popular [lidovou] literature'.⁴⁴ Teige greatly valued the capacity of mass culture to produce a positive reaction in its audience and contrasted this with some of the more obscure works of modernist production, stating that 'Alexander Blok's works could not approach the readership enjoyed by the anonymous authors of Buffalo Bill novels' and insisting that the modern artist should think long and hard about why the masses responded spontaneously and positively to Chaplin, Sherlock Holmes stories, or the Good Soldier Švejk while remaining indifferent to Verlaine, Braque, and Picasso (all artists for whom he otherwise had enormous respect).⁴⁵ Teige, in short, took the openly receptive position towards mass culture that would later so famously spark Benjamin's exchange with Theodor Adorno, who expressed great discomfort with what he felt to be Benjamin's 'romanticization' of the Chaplin grotesque and the 'laughter of the film spectator'.⁴⁶ Just as Teige discovered new cultural forms in what others regard as deformities, so Benjamin, discussing changes in the reception of culture, cautioned that 'the fact that this new mode of perception first appeared in a disreputable form should not mislead the observer'.⁴⁷ And just as Teige felt that popular culture exerted a positive, progressive emotional effect on the masses alienated from high culture, so Benjamin emphasized: '*The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude towards a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film*'.⁴⁸

44 Karel Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské' [The New Proletarian Art], in Teige, *Výbor*, I, 33–63 (p. 58).

45 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 58; and see also Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 189.

46 The relevant passage from Adorno's letter is reproduced in Benjamin, GS, I, 1003–04; an English translation is contained in *New Left Review*, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 123–24. Teige thus stands close to Benjamin's understanding of laughter as 'the dialectical precondition for a genuine seriousness'; Tim Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 12.

47 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 119; 'Kunstwerk', p. 380.

48 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 116; 'Kunstwerk', p. 374, emphasis in original. Benjamin connected this progressive reaction with the fact that 'everyone who witnesses these performances [in film and sport] does so as a quasi-expert' ('Artwork', p. 114; 'Kunstwerk', p. 371). Benjamin gives the example of newspaper boys leaning on their bikes and analysing a bicycle race. Here, too, Teige's

The privileged forum for such transformative encounters with mass or popular culture was film. In the *Work of Art* essay Benjamin compared film to the epic as a mode of collective reception.⁴⁹ In 1922 Teige enthusiastically described film as ‘the most powerful fact of contemporary culture and civilization’, ‘the true lexicon of the new art’, and even as ‘a Bethlehem whence comes the salvation of modern art’.⁵⁰ What initially motivated Teige’s identification of this new medium as a crucial phenomenon of modern culture was its mass appeal, the ‘almost unconditional support and enthusiastic applause of the audience’.⁵¹ But after breathlessly listing the ways that film draws on and energizes various features of popular culture — American bars, novels about the tropics or prairies, dance halls, circuses, and so forth — Teige suddenly connects the power of film with its nature as a medium utterly saturated with technology:

[Film contains] the pure power of modern *poesie*. It has its own precise form, which functions more perfectly than classical stanzas and the sonnets of the poets [...]. [I]n its origin in the optical discoveries of chronophotography and mechanical and chemical production it is an exemplar and model for all new art [...]. It is correct to say that the invention of the cinema has for us the same importance as the invention of the printing press for the Renaissance: here, too, mechanical production distributes art to its spectatorship. [...] *Yes, all modern artistic culture consists in and must consist in mechanical production [strojové výrobě]*.⁵²

Teige thus placed film at a crucial nodal point in the technological development of art and identified it as the archetypal modern medium.⁵³ In contrast to his statements about other visual media (such as the picture-poem), Teige wrote here of technological *production* (*výroba*), not *reproduction* (*reprodukce*). This constituted the privileged moment of film: it did not start with an original art object and subsequently make use of technology for its reproduction or distribution, but was

logic is similar when he claims that Poetist art ‘must be just as self-evident, passionate, and accessible as sports, love, wine, and all delicacies’; Karel Teige, ‘Poetism’, trans. by Ian Finlay, in *From Laughter to Forgetting: A Sourcebook of Czech Interwar Avant-Garde Discourses*, ed. by Zuzana Říhová (Prague: Karolinum, 2023), pp. 149–56 (p. 149), translation modified; ‘Poetismus’, in *Výbor*, I, 121–28 (p. 121).

49 See Benjamin, ‘Artwork’, p. 116; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 375.

50 Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’, pp. 190–91. In the final phrase Teige teasingly imitates a traditional Czech Christmas carol. In these passages, too, Teige raises the caveat that the word ‘art’ does not quite fit these modern cultural phenomena.

51 Ibid., p. 193.

52 Ibid., p. 193. Italics in original.

53 Teige presupposed a narrative about the historical development of art that focused on nodal points associated with technological breakthroughs (e.g., the printing press or film), much as does Benjamin. For both thinkers these breakthroughs could be ‘anticipated’ before the necessary technological means to enact them existed. We have seen how Benjamin cast Dada as an anticipation of filmic effects such as montage. In an incidental but thoroughly Benjaminian comment, Teige described the use of stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals as a utopian anticipation of the use of projected, coloured light for artistic purposes, a wish image that required eight centuries for technology to provide the means for its fulfilment in cinema; see Karel Teige, ‘Poesie pro 5 smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu’, in Teige, *Svět, který voní* (Prague: Odeon, 1931; facsimile reprint Prague: Akropolis, 2004), pp. 195–237 (p. 207). Compare Benjamin’s claim that ‘It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come’ (‘Artwork’, p. 118; ‘Kunstwerk’, p. 378).



FIG. 7.1. Jaromír Funke, from the series *Čas trvá* [Time Persists] (1930–34).
Regional Museum in Kolín

rather from the outset a mass-produced product. Teige did not explicitly state that film eliminates originals altogether, but his enthusiasm was based on film's status as a 'purely' cultural object that is simultaneously a product of technological production just like the cars, airplanes, and telephones he invoked to show how the achievements of engineers, though not intended as aesthetic objects, had none the less trumped the self-indulgence of poets. Film thus provided Teige the main evidence for his argument that 'even standardized mechanical production gives rise to a new beauty', and that 'beauty is not the exclusive domain of so-called art'.⁵⁴

To take stock then: by 1923 (1925 at the very latest), Teige's theoretical position entailed the following points. Art in modern society was undergoing a transformation so radical that it barely made sense to use the term at all, a transformation returning to the original meanings of *technē*; this transformation was linked to the technological reproducibility of cultural objects; the saturation of cultural objects with technology eroded, and ultimately promised to destroy, the status of the original; traditional cultic functions of art, remnants from its originary association with religious ritual, were giving way to a libratory process releasing art into spaces where exhibition value and use value took on primary importance; these processes led inescapably to the politicization of aesthetics and culture as these were brought closer to the masses and functioned as a source of social empowerment; the popularization of culture pushed the form of 'art' in the direction of mass culture; and film represented the most advanced stage of these developments, equal in impact to the invention of the printing press in the Renaissance.

Clearly, much of the basic argument of the Work of Art essay is contained here. To be sure, Benjamin's formulations are more subtle conceptually and more resonant philosophically. In addition, writing in 1935 allowed (indeed forced) Benjamin to take several of these arguments further than did Teige.⁵⁵ What stands revealed as an obdurate phantasm, however, is the 'strong thesis' regarding Benjamin's heresies: that is, that when making these arguments about technological reproducibility leading to the loss of artistic aura in 1935 Benjamin was putting forward an original and shocking line of thought. By the time of the Work of Art essay, in fact, the liquidationist discourse had even begun to reverse direction: rather than aesthetic theory attempting to articulate the implications of raw cultural practice, art objects had begun to illustrate explicitly what were already familiar theoretical tenets. If Benjamin had wished to embody his central thesis about the liquidation of aura in a visual image, he could hardly have done better than to turn to Jaromír Funke (1896–1945), one of the leading experimenters in Czech interwar photography and in many respects a 'fellow traveller' of Devětsil.⁵⁶ Funke's quasi-Surrealist photo

54 Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítřa', p. 190.

55 For example, while Teige's texts are suffused with the imperative to politicize aesthetics, Fascism obviously did not present the urgent threat for him in 1925 that it did for Benjamin in 1935. By the mid-1930s Teige was also critiquing the aestheticization of politics in Nazism — and, he grudgingly admits, to an increasing degree in the Soviet Union as well. By this time, however, the technical reproducibility of culture was no longer the vital matter it had been for him in the 1920s.

56 On Funke, see Antonín Dufek, *Jaromír Funke: Mezi Konstrukcí a Emocí* (Brno and Prague: Moravian Gallery in Brno and Kant, 2013).

series *Čas trvá* [Time Persists], created between 1930 and 1934, includes the striking image of a sculptured angel reaching upwards and holding a wreath resembling a halo (Fig. 7.1). The photograph makes expert use of the vocabulary of pseudo-auratic pictorialism: hazy light, soft focus, melodramatic gesture. Yet these elements are starkly ironic, since foreshortening makes a distant factory smokestack appear to be right in front of the winged angel. This juxtaposition transforms the gesture: the upward reach becomes an awkward stretch, an attempt to dump the halo of art into the inconveniently tall furnace of industry.

CHAPTER 8



Aura and Ornament: The Wish-Image of Integrity

By 1935 the liquidationist claims of Benjamin's Work of Art essay were the *Jüngstvergangene*, the recent past, of avant-garde thought. That is decidedly not to say they were passé — indeed the political urgencies of the mid-1930s likely reinforced the authority of such liquidationist claims as a weapon against false aestheticization.¹ But the basic arguments had consolidated into a common line that would be easily recognized and enjoyed widespread acceptance within avant-garde circles. From this angle, what stands out more prominently in the Work of Art essay is not the 'liquidation of aura' thesis but rather the sustained attention Benjamin devoted to the structure of auratic art itself (which, for a thinker such as Teige, was primarily of negative interest as something to reject). Even this observation, to be sure, has a hallowed past, and underlies two prominent approaches to Benjamin's conception of the aura: the first comprises the many fruitful analyses of Benjamin's 'ambiguous attitude' towards modernity or the way he straddled the 'antinomies of tradition', while the second encompasses accounts of Benjamin's 'redemptive' critical practice, that is, the claim that while Benjamin embraced the anti-auratic tendencies of avant-garde cultural practice he did so in the name of 'rescuing' a form of experience closely identified with auratic art.² The 'ambivalence' approach

1 Benjamin explicitly linked his hermeneutic examination of the 'signature of the age' with the political agenda of the Work of Art essay; see Benjamin, 'The Signatures of the Age', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996–2003) (hereafter 'SW'), III, 139–40. German original (untitled) in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–89) (hereafter 'GS'), VII, 668–69.

2 For two important instances of the 'ambivalence' thesis, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 50; and John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), *passim*. Other commentators follow similar logic but with different terminology: thus Diarmuid Costello writes that 'Benjamin's attitude is marked not so much by ambivalence as by a double-edged response. He welcomes *and* mourns its passing simultaneously; his remarks about aura manifest both a "liquidationist" and an "elegiac" undertow'; Diarmuid Costello, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, pp. 164–84 (p. 178). The *locus classicus* for the 'redemption' approach is Jürgen Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', trans. by Frederick Lawrence, in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 90–128 (esp. pp. 106–08). See

admits an unresolved inconsistency at the heart of Benjamin's thought but has also grounded his appeal for many readers for whom disillusion with avant-gardism or high modernism is paramount. The 'redemption' approach grants Benjamin greater theoretical consistency but implicitly links him with a decidedly utopian strain in avant-garde thought. Both approaches, however, leave the liquidationist claims unchallenged as the radical core of the Work of Art essay. Whether Benjamin embraced those claims with a wistful glance backwards or with all too great expectations, they are understood to generate shock value and to place the essay at the forefront of avant-garde theoretical speculation at that time.

This chapter will argue for a different perspective on the Work of Art essay by applying to it Benjamin's own conception of the 'wish image' (*Wunschbild*). The wish image I propose is that of the 'vanishing point' — a striking image that, as we saw at the outset of the previous chapter, Benjamin used to describe the relation of the Work of Art essay to his major, unfinished historical project, *Das Passagen-Werk* [The Arcades Project]: 'The issue this time is to indicate the precise point in the present to which my historical construction will orient itself, as to its vanishing point'.³ The application of this wish image must remain to a degree heuristic, yet precisely the contrast with a more orthodox avant-gardist thinker such as Teige — who, as we shall see, also invoked the image of the 'vanishing point' — brings out what was at stake more clearly.

Certain obstacles to such an application require attention at the outset. In two fundamental respects Benjamin's understanding of the wish image, as put forward in his 1935 'Exposé' for the *Passagen-Werk* entitled 'Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts' [Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century] (written just a few months before the first version of the Work of Art essay), resists precise application to the material of the Work of Art essay. The first reason is that Benjamin uses the wish image as a tool for historical analysis: wish images are necessarily invisible to those in their thrall and reveal themselves only to observers at a temporal remove. To describe a wish image holding sway over one's own present is, in a sense, equivalent to attempting to lift oneself up by one's own bootstraps and out of one's own historical moment. But that Benjamin himself has provided a conceptual tool to understand a wish image to which he himself was beholden is only testament to the self-reflective power of his thought. The wish image of the vanishing point provides both a striking perspective on the antinomies within Teige's thought, and a more persuasive response to the internal tensions of the Work of Art essay than does the 'ambivalence' approach: for Benjamin is both in the thrall of liquidationist logic and critical of some of its fundamentally utopian impulses. In other words, Benjamin's position may be understood less as elegiac ambivalence concerning the vanishing of aura than as veiled suspicion about the liquidationist claim that aura will vanish, that is, that the vanishing point can ever be reached. Second, liquidationist

also, e.g., Burkhardt Lindner, 'Benjamins Aurakonzepion: Anthropologie und Technik, Bild und Text', in *Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940, zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. by Uwe Steiner (Berne: Lang, 1992), pp. 217–48 (p. 232).

3 Letter to Max Horkheimer, in *CWB*, p. 509; *GS*, 1, 983.

logic requires re-tooling the concept of the wish image, which Benjamin developed primarily in consideration of the historicist wish imagery of the nineteenth century. In the 'Exposé' Benjamin described wish images as images 'in which the new is permeated with the old. [...W]hat emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated — which includes, however, the recent past [*das Jüngstvergangene*]. These tendencies deflect the imagination [*Bildphantasie*] (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past [*das Urvergangene*'].⁴ Striving against the outmoded — equated here with the most recent past — wish images reach back to the primal visual vocabulary of *Urgeschichte*, allowing the new to appear infused with a utopian force. Yet this gesture against temporal flow, the mingling of the new with images drawn from the primal past, is precisely what the liquidationist position forbids. While compulsion to distance itself from the *Jüngstvergangene* certainly characterizes liquidationist logic, this compulsion acts in the name of a temporal 'purity' that makes the admixture of archaic forms anathema. The temporal movement can only be forward, never backward.

For this reason the liquidationist wish-image underlying Teige and Benjamin's materialist theory of art must take spatial rather than temporal form. The vanishing point Benjamin used to describe the Work of Art essay in his letter to Horkheimer provides an apposite conceptual figure, for it connotes a 'space' to be arrived at, the hypothetical future end-point of the developmental process for which the withering of the aura is the major symptom. And while liquidationist logic stringently denies itself the right to meld the new with the archaic, Benjamin does concede that the wish image of the vanishing point posits a different series of fused oppositions, such as between 'seriousness and play, rigor and license', that cannot help but remind us of Teige and his drive to integrate dualisms, most prominently that between stringent Constructivism and ludic Poetism.⁵ What vanishes with the aura is the line separating the terms in these oppositions. Further comparison with Teige helps determine just how far the Work of Art essay is beholden to the wish image of the vanishing point.

Benjamin's most impassioned defence of what could be called the liquidationist standard line appeared in a text published two years before he began work on the Work of Art essay. His 1933 article 'Erfahrung und Armut' [Experience and Poverty], celebrating the 'new barbarians' who have responded to the experiential poverty of modernity not with despair but rather with a drive 'to start from scratch; to make a new start' invokes a series of Constructivist truisms that Teige (and other proponents of Constructivism) had been using since the early 1920s.⁶ For

4 Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts', in *GS*, v, 45–59 (pp. 46–47); Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 3–13 (p. 4) (this volume hereafter '*Arcades*').

5 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)' (hereafter 'Artwork'), in *SW*, III, 101–33 (p. 107). German original: 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (*Zweite Fassung*)' (hereafter 'Kunstwerk'), in *GS*, VII, 350–84 (p. 359).

6 Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, II, 731–35 (p. 732); 'Erfahrung und Armut', in *GS*, II, 213–19 (p. 215).

example, Benjamin decries the architecture of the bourgeois era as representing 'the horrific mishmash of styles' and presupposing a 'traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past', and in the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin evokes a Nietzschean association of 'the masquerade of styles' with bourgeois nihilism.⁷ The new barbarians, by contrast, represented 'constructors' who, committed to the ideals of logical transparency, egalitarian social re-structuring, and sober commitment to the contemporary age, would clear the tables in the manner of Descartes.⁸

In language that sounds perhaps intentionally crude in a text by Benjamin but that hews closely to Constructivist logic, Benjamin associates the radical gesture of the barbarian constructors with the transparency and clean surface of glass architecture, invoking specifically the architecture of Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus as well as (more idiosyncratically) the novels of Paul Scheerbart.⁹ In a sentence anticipating the central term of the Work of Art essay a few years later Benjamin writes: 'Objects made of glass have no "aura". Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession'.¹⁰ In this essay Benjamin displays no ambivalence: aura must go. The vanishing of the aura is not merely a developmental necessity that one might welcome or decry, but a programme to be actively pursued, since sweeping away the historical detritus of 'culture' (Benjamin himself uses quotation marks) inaugurates radical social reorganization, hostile to the bourgeois values of individualism and private property. The rhetorical similarity of this text to a nearly contemporaneous text on architectural functionalism and urban planning by Teige stands out starkly in their critical descriptions of the 'bourgeois interior'. One year earlier Teige had written:

A room of the eighties and nineties of the last century is a stuffy place, full of dust and cobwebs hidden in inaccessible nooks and crannies, full of germs and stale air. Furniture is not there for the purpose of living but only for representation and a show of opulence: here we find vitrines, jardinières, huge clocks, pedestals, thrones instead of chairs, ceramic turtles and plaster busts

7 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 733; 'Erfahrung und Armut', pp. 215–16. In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin links stylistic eclecticism with the disguised power exercised by the bourgeoisie and states that the 'the style of their residences is their false immediacy'; *Arcades Project*, p. 218; GS, v, 288–89.

8 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 732; 'Erfahrung und Armut', 215. It is worth noting that 'Erfahrung und Armut' was originally published in the Prague newspaper *Die Welt im Wort*. Teige, as far as I know, never commented on the piece — surprising given the proximity to his own concerns. This silence might indicate that he found Benjamin's liquidationist claims conventional or even retrograde (he would certainly have raised an eyebrow at Benjamin's praise of Scheerbart). On Cartesianism and the transparency ideal within Constructivism, see Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Ch. 2.

9 Indeed at times glass architecture becomes for Benjamin — as it was for Teige — a competitor to film as archetypal modern technological medium: see, for example, Benjamin's note in *Das Passagen-Werk* that 'It is the peculiarity of technological forms of production (as opposed to art forms) that their progress and their success are proportionate to the transparency of their social content. (Hence glass architecture)'; *Arcades*, p. 465; GS, v, 581; emphases in original.

10 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 734; 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 217.

(Napoleon, Dante, Tyrš, and Fügner), embroidered coverlets and cushions, real or imitation oriental carpets and tiger hides, paper palms, glass flowers as lamps, appliqués, batiques, and so on, and so on. The textile of choice is velvet: germs and dust thrive in this material that cannot be laundered or cleaned. Ornamentation, naturally, is the correlative accompaniment to such accommodation and furnishings.¹¹

In 'Erfahrung und Armut' Benjamin wrote:

If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, 'You've got no business here'. And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark — the ornaments on the mantel piece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire.¹²

In his 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' [Little History of Photography] (1931), one of the other main texts anticipating the conception of aura in the Work of Art essay, Benjamin evoked similar interior details to describe the later nineteenth-century photography ateliers 'with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels [...], which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room'; he describes a childhood photographic portrait of Kafka in such a setting, reminiscent of a 'greenhouse landscape' or 'upholstered tropics' that are 'thick with palm fronds'.¹³ Benjamin then contrasted this practice with the photographs of Eugène Atget (1857–1927), which were 'the forerunners of Surrealist photography' and 'the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline', and which initiated the 'emancipation of object from aura', in a passage marked by vocabulary of hygiene and disinfection similar to Teige's.¹⁴ Like Teige, Benjamin focused on velvet and plush as the characteristic material for such interiors, emphasizing not only the ability to retain traces (*Spuren*) of the inhabitants' lives but also their role 'as dust collectors'.¹⁵

11 Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, trans. by Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 164–65, translation modified. Czech original: Karel Teige, *Nejmenší byt* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1932), p. 155. This apotropaic image of 'the bourgeois interior' of the late nineteenth century changed only little from the image of the 'lair of the Decadent', as in the fictional Jean des Esseintes's home in Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À rebours*, or in the actual flat of Arnošt Procházka (1869–1925), one of the leading Czech Decadents, as described in the memoirs of his contemporary Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951); see the excerpt in Neil Stewart, *Bohemiens im böhmischen Blätterwald: Die Zeitschrift 'Moderní revue' und die Prager Moderne* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2019), pp. 48–49.

12 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 734; 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 217. A similar passage appears in one of Benjamin's *Denkbilder* titled 'To live without leaving traces', in Benjamin, *SW*, II, 701–02; *GS*, IV, 427–28.

13 Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *SW*, II, 507–28 (p. 515); 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', in *GS*, II, 368–85 (p. 375).

14 Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', p. 518; 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', p. 378.

15 Benjamin, *Arcades*, pp. 222 and 103; *GS*, V, 294 and 158. Ornament collects dust as inevitably as does plush; for this reason Benjamin links both to his theme of the nineteenth century as the era of boredom; see Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 106; *GS*, V, 162.

Thus in 'Erfahrung und Armut' and related texts Benjamin aligned the vanishing of the aura thesis with the familiar functionalist critique of ornament: aura is ornamental, a historical trace now become superfluous, unhygienic, and pernicious in its linkage with bourgeois ideals. In his 1930 report on hashish Benjamin linked aura and ornament explicitly: 'the characteristic feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case'.¹⁶ In its favoured architectural environments as in its favoured means of intoxication, late bourgeois society huddled desperately around the embers of the auratic in the form of external ornamentation and interior plush. Yet this desperation had sinister consequences:

Nineteenth-century domestic interior. The space disguises itself — puts on, like an alluring creature, the costume of moods. The self-satisfied burgher should know something of the feeling that the next room might have witnessed the coronation of Charlemagne as well as the assassination of Henri IV, the signing of the Treaty of Verdun as well as the wedding of Otto and Theophano. In the end, things are merely mannequins, and even the great moments in world history are only costumes beneath which they exchange glances of complicity with nothingness, with the petty and the banal. Such nihilism is the innermost core of bourgeois coziness — a mood that in hashish intoxication concentrates on satanic contentment, satanic knowing, satanic calm, indicating precisely to what extent the nineteenth-century interior is itself a stimulus to intoxication and dream.¹⁷

So much for coziness. Benjamin neatly interweaves here the liquidationist tenor of his understanding of the bourgeois interior with broader themes we have encountered from the critique of historicism (reduction of the historical to costumes, disguised identity, the 'complicity with nothingness'). The only proper response to this satanic nihilism was to follow Atget's example and sweep both ornament and aura away. In a sentiment Teige would have seconded without reserve, Benjamin cites Brecht's exhortation: "'Erase the traces!'" ("Verwisch die Spuren!").¹⁸

Yet elsewhere Benjamin grants precisely these same traces privileged cognitive value. In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin does not unvaryingly align, but also at times contrasts his approach to that of Sigfried Giedion:

'Apart from a certain *haut-goût* charm,' says Giedion, 'the artistic draperies and wall-hangings of the previous century have come to seem musty.' [...] We, however, believe that the charm they exercise on us is proof that these things, too, contain material of vital importance for us — not indeed for our building practice, as is the case with the constructive possibilities inherent in iron frameworks, but rather for our understanding, for the radiology, if you

16 Benjamin, 'Hashish, Beginning of March 1930', in *SW*, II, 327–30 (p. 328); 'Haschisch Anfang März 1930', *GS*, VI, 587–91 (p. 588). The context of the hashish protocol is somewhat different from the liquidationist framework of 'Poverty and Experience' and the *Work of Art* essay and indeed anticipates the pivot described in my following paragraphs; yet the direct linkage of aura and ornament expressed here remains significant.

17 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 216; *GS*, V, 286.

18 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', p. 734; 'Erfahrung und Armut', p. 217. See also *SW*, II, 701; *GS*, IV, 427.

will, of the situation of the bourgeois class at the moment it evinces the first signs of decline. In any event, material of vital importance politically [...]. In other words: just as Giedion teaches us to read off the basic features of today's architecture in buildings erected around 1850, we, in turn, would recognize today's life, today's forms, in the life and in the apparently secondary, lost forms of that epoch.¹⁹

This passage points to a crucial logical pivot in the *Passagen-Werk*, one that has fundamental implications for the Work of Art essay. More important here than the word 'charm' (*Reiz*) — which can too easily be taken as a coded sigh — are the phrases 'radioscopy of the situation of the bourgeois class' and 'of vital importance politically'. These mark the cognitive force Benjamin identified in outmoded ephemera: the musty materials that Giedion would have us ruthlessly discard must be studied and analysed, for the phantasms and dreams they expressed were not merely ideology to be exposed and discarded but underlay the present moment. The nature of this cognitive force comes through even more clearly in the following passage describing the proper response to the ideological phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century:

It is not only that the forms of appearance taken by the dream collective in the nineteenth century cannot be thought away; and not only that these forms characterize this collective much more decisively than any other — they are also, rightly interpreted, of the highest practical import, for they allow us to recognize the seat on which we navigate and the shore from which we push off. It is here, therefore, that the 'critique' of the nineteenth century — to say it in one word — ought to begin. The critique not of its mechanism and cult of machinery but of its narcotic historicism, its passion for masks [*seinem narkotischen Historismus, seiner Maskensucht*], in which nevertheless lurks a signal of true historical existence [*ein Signal von wahrer historischer Existenz*], one which the Surrealists were the first to pick up. To decipher this signal is the concern of the present undertaking.²⁰

Here Benjamin brings in a constellation of terms we have encountered many times in the foregoing chapters: terms identifying the nineteenth century with a historicist imagination that is in some manner deluded and false ('narcotic'), and obsessed with masks and disguises. This constellation encompasses Marx's faux-revolutionaries of 1848, with their farcical play-acting in historical costumes, Muthesius's chaotic and nihilistic battle among historical revival styles in architecture, Lukács's exoticizing and escapist Naturalist novel, and of course the 'historicism' that Teige saw everywhere as the fundamental affliction of the various cultural practices that the avant-garde was to eradicate. The 'upholstered tropics' of the bourgeois interior, with its ceramic turtles, palm-tree lampshades, and tiger-hide textiles, has its natural place within this landscape of superficiality and falseness. Yet Benjamin's response to this historicist phantasmagoria is unique. He does not simply throw it away (despite his occasional invocation of Brecht's demand that we 'erase the traces!'), but calls for its interpretation and assembly into 'dialectical images', the

19 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 458; GS, v, 572.

20 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 391; GS, v, 493.

core of his conception of historical materialism. In doing so he contrasts the falsity and narcotic delusion of historicism to the ‘signal of true historical existence’ of which historicism was the cipher. In short, Benjamin distinguishes — in a manner that Teige and most figures of the twentieth-century avant-garde did not — between *historicism* and actual *historical existence*, developing a conception of history ‘that is constrained to undo the identification of history with the temporality of historicism’.²¹

In such passages Benjamin pivots from the logic of a Constructivist to that of the ‘ragpicker’, one of his favoured character-types and a self-conscious model for his own theoretical procedure in the *Passagen-Werk*.²² Benjamin connects these two rhetorical constellations through the concept of montage. He sounds like a good Constructivist when he states that it is crucial ‘to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components [*Baugliedern*]’.²³ This passage picks up on his identification of the Eiffel Tower — an iconic artefact for Constructivists such as Teige — as ‘the earliest manifestation of the principle of montage’, constructed from millions of minute, precisely coordinated pieces.²⁴ The constructive process, as well as the breathtaking new vistas revealed from atop these structures, is the proper reserve of the engineer and the high-steel worker.²⁵ But montage is also the method of the ragpicker: ‘Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse [*die Lumpen, den Abfall*] — these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them’.²⁶ Here the materials for montage are not the precisely constructed components of the constructor but rather the loose detritus gathered by the historian as ragpicker. While Benjamin never states this explicitly, this ragpicker model effects a radical re-evaluation of liquidationist logic: the dusty carpets and mouldering tiger pelts, the flower-shaped lamps and throne-like dining-room chairs are no longer to be thrown out with an indignant cry of ‘erase the traces!’ but are to be gathered and

21 Andrew Benjamin, *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), p. 16. Andrew Benjamin posits a temporality of modernism that ‘is bound up with an interruption or severance’; for him Walter Benjamin’s project ‘inheres in the possibility that interruption and discontinuity can be understood as originating (or generative)’ and thus his critique of historicism as ‘the attempt to establish continuity’ constitutes a fundamentally modernist gesture. See *ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv. I argue by contrast that Walter Benjamin has identified a moment of complicity in the rhetoric of the avant-garde and the historicism it despised.

22 Miriam Bratru Hansen discusses Benjamin’s ‘position-switching’ between different texts in *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 81. Yet this particular pivot exists within the *Passagen-Werk* material, suggesting that the juxtaposition is more than mere tactical convenience.

23 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 461; GS, v, 575.

24 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 160; GS, v, 223.

25 See Benjamin, *Arcades*, pp. 156 and 459; GS, v, 218 and 572. Benjamin further associates this image of the ‘panoramic view’ from atop modern structures with the ideal of philosophical ‘Anschaulichkeit’ or perceptibility (*Arcades*, p. 461; GS, v, 575).

26 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 460; GS, v, 574.

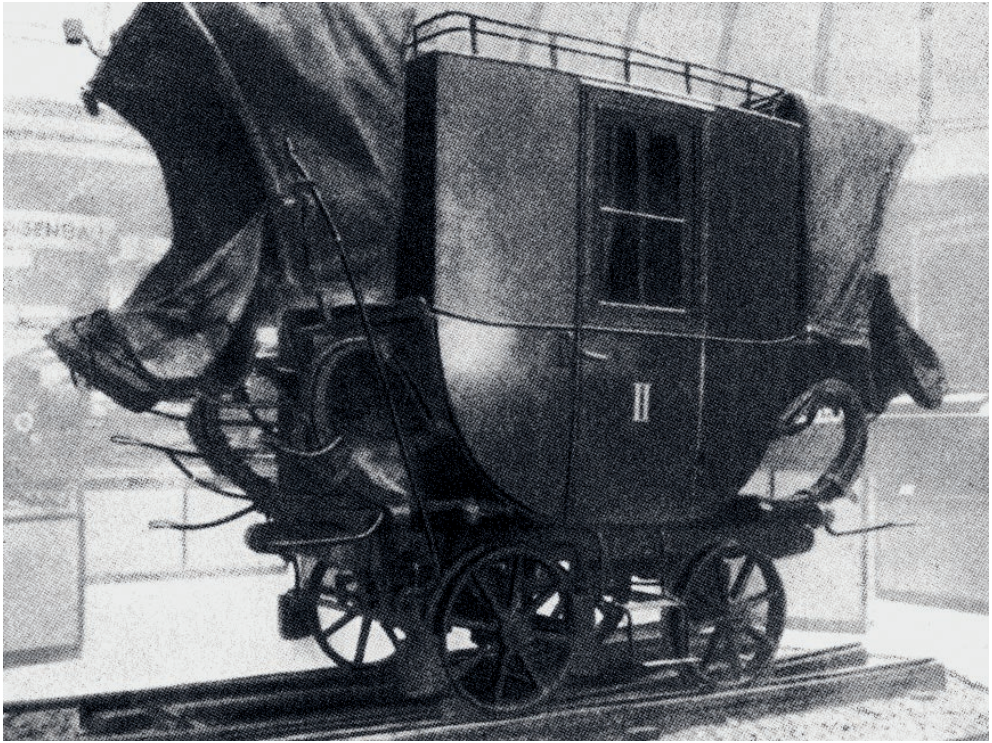


FIG. 8.1. Railway car, 1825

explored as a wilderness of cognitive raw material.²⁷ Superfluous ornaments have transformed into constructive building blocks of the dialectical image.

This pivot should not be dismissed as ambivalence, confusion, or a curiosity resulting from Benjamin's tendency to think in images. Rather, it harbours a two-fold critique of the liquidationist logic that the *Work of Art* essay is often understood to champion. These claims in the *Passagen-Werk* reveal Benjamin's wariness of, first, an ideology of progress and, second, a holistic tendency he finds dubious lurking within the liquidationist discourse invoked in the *Work of Art* essay.

These limits to Benjamin's liquidationism can be pinpointed more precisely through comparison with Teige. Discussing the emergence of modernist architecture in the territory that would become Czechoslovakia, Teige emphasized (in a manner quite standard for contemporary accounts of modern architecture) its origin in engineering works and in the development of iron and glass as construction materials in the nineteenth century. He pointed to the immature, hybrid nature of the earliest products of the engineers: the first railway on the Continent, designed by František Josef Gerstner and constructed between Linz and Budweis (České Budějovice) in 1825–28, was still drawn by horses and the railway-cars resembled

27 Indeed such a landscape of 'secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hairdryer and Venus de Milo', stands at the outset of Benjamin's earliest notes for the *Passagen-Werk*; Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 827; GS, v, 993.

horse-drawn carriages (Fig. 8.1); cast-iron bridges and functional structures from mid-century and well beyond still utilized Neogothic forms.²⁸ For Teige, such outdated forms were senseless except insofar as they offered partial glimpses of coming architectural practices. The 'horrid iron Gothic' merely documented the historical fetters holding the imagination captive; one had to look through such phenomena in order to perceive the gradual emergence of more authentic forms of modern construction.²⁹ Benjamin echoed this sort of rhetoric often enough, such as in the 1935 *Exposé* of the *Passagen-Werk*, where he wrote: 'Just as Napoleon failed to understand the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, so the architects of the time failed to understand the functional nature of iron, with which the constructive principle begins its domination of architecture'.³⁰ Yet when he discussed the hybrid forms assumed by 'glass before its time, premature iron' ('zu früh gekommenes Glas, zu frühes Eisen') — such as an early design for a locomotive that would run on 'feet' like a horse, or plans to have steam-cars run on granite streets rather than iron tracks — they subtly transform into documents not just of torpor and timidity but also of creativity and longing.³¹ Rather than merely historical fetters, these forms channel primal hopes and desires: historical forms frame perspectives to the future (see Fig. 8.2). Benjamin rejected historical narratives that cast an entire era as embodying either a 'not yet' or cultural decrepitude: 'The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline [*Verfallszeiten*]. Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to see the seventeenth, in the work on *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline'.³² Here he went beyond the project of simply exposing 'bourgeois' ideological errors or commodity fetishism, and his argument was not that one must painstakingly analyse the 'Traumschlaf' or dream-filled sleep of the nineteenth century simply in order to wake from the phantasmagoria established under early capitalism. Rather, one must bracket (in an explicit analogy to psychoanalytic method) the 'clear-cut antithesis of sleeping and waking' itself.³³ Benjamin wrote:

It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various 'fields' of any epoch, such that on one side lies the 'productive', 'forward-looking', 'lively', 'positive' part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent. [... But] every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the positive. It is therefore

28 See Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 60–67.

29 Teige, *Modern Architecture*, p. 67.

30 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 4; GS, v, 46. Convolute 'F' ('Iron Construction') of the *Passagen-Werk* presents many further examples.

31 Benjamin, *Arcades*, pp. 150, 155, and 156; GS, v, 211, 217 and 218.

32 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 458; GS, v, 571.

33 Benjamin, *Arcades*, pp. 389; GS, v, 492. Similarly, Benjamin replaced the traditional Marxist trope of base/superstructure (with its tendency to reduce 'culture' to 'ideology' or 'reflection') with a concept of 'expression' (*Ausdruck*) drawn from psychological and psychoanalytic practice. See *Arcades*, pp. 391 and 392; GS, v, 494 and 95, as well as his replacement of the 'base/superstructure' vocabulary with that of 'consciousness/unconscious' in the 'Exposé' (cf. *Arcades*, pp. 893 and 894; GS, v, 1224–25 and 46–47).

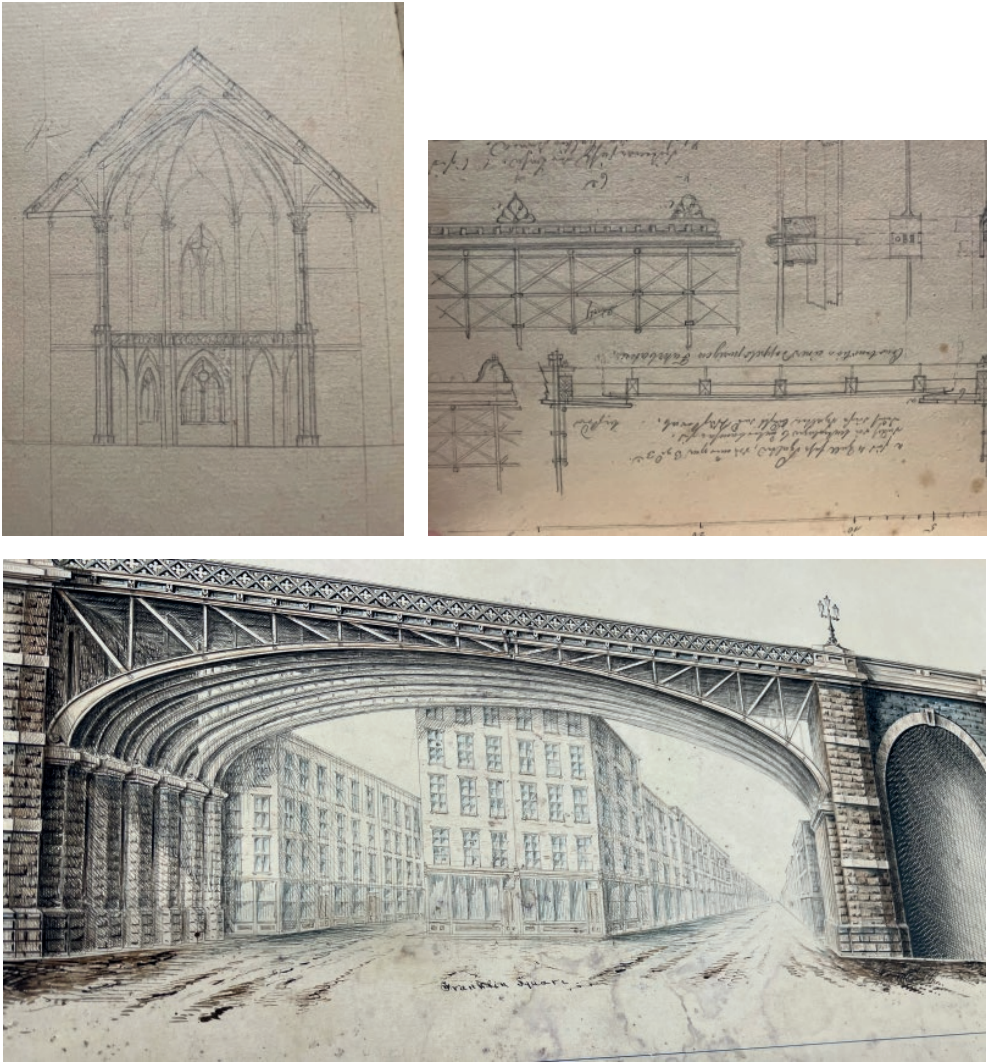


FIG. 8.2. Bridges to the past, perspectives towards the future.

Above: two sketches from the journal of John A. Roebling (1806–69).

Roebling family archives.

Below: detail of the approach ramp from John A. Roebling's proposal for the Brooklyn Bridge (1870), drafted by Wilhelm Hildenbrand (original size 164 × 22 inches). The New York City Municipal Archives

of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that [...] a positive element emerges in it too [...]. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.³⁴

The markedly theological term 'apocatastasis', and the implicitly redemptive project it serves here, might suggest that we have tripped upon the often noted antagonism in Benjamin's thought between the mystical and the materialist, the redemptive and the radical. But Benjamin's criticism of a crassly 'black-and-white' or 'delusion-and-clarity' projection of history, and his mathematical image of an integral calculus that would sharpen the image, are in at least one sense perfectly compatible with his materialist project: they warn against reading the past as a narrative of progress towards the present. When Benjamin shortly afterwards describes his aim as 'to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress', he sets himself in contrast to precisely the form of historical materialism Teige pursued with his narrative of progressive 'erasure' of regressive historical traces over the course of the nineteenth century.³⁵ In other words, liquidationist discourse risks positing a fixed telos and then reading the past as linear progress towards that endpoint: an endpoint at which fundamental diremptions between structure and ornament, function and aesthetics, truth and ideology, indeed matter and spirit, are presumed to vanish.

The implications of Benjamin's association of the liquidationist wish image with progressionism are stark. For elsewhere Benjamin understood progressionism as a feature of historicism. In his important late text 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' [On the Concept of History] he wrote: 'The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.'³⁶ Benjamin does not use the term 'historicism' in this passage (rather he speaks of Social Democracy, which he presents more or less as a politics modelled on historicist patterns of thought) but he does do so shortly thereafter in a closely related passage: 'Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. It may be that materialist historiography differs in method more clearly from universal history than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time'.³⁷ Here we have a version of historicism close to what we saw in Nietzsche: the consumption of data without hunger or subjective motivation, with no 'shaping impulse directed outward', resulting in 'walking encyclopedias' stuffed with 'with alien times, customs, arts, philosophies, religions and knowledge' — a universal history of everything and thus nothing.³⁸

34 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 459; GS, v, 573.

35 Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 460; GS, v, 574.

36 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' (1940), in *SW*, iv, 389–400 (pp. 394–95); 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *GS*, i, 691–704 (p. 701).

37 Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', p. 396; 'Über den Begriff', p. 702.

38 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. by Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995),

The homogenous empty time of historicism stands in these passages as the direct opposite of the mode of historical perception Benjamin is most concerned to present in this text, as embodied in his famous call for a 'conception of the present as now-time [*Jetztzeit*] shot through with splinters of messianic time'.³⁹ But most important in this context is that this negative conception of historicism as empty time, roughly comparable to what we have been concerned with for most of this book, is *not* comparable to the careful sifting through historical phantasms and ornamental detritus we have seen Benjamin call for above and which the liquidationist discourse despises as historicist. Quite the opposite: what the liquidationist discourse denounces as historicist ornament, Benjamin *contrasts* to the homogenous time of historicism and *cherishes* as raw material for the dialectical images of a true materialist historiography. He therefore splits open the critique of historicism in a unique fashion: he retains the Nietzschean rejection of greedy consumption of historical knowledge for no purpose other than filling the homogenous temporal void and producing universal history, but he rejects the critique of historicist ornament as pernicious supplement, as a parasite blemishing a pure constructive structure. The surprising, yet logical, corollary to this is that he implicitly links liquidationist discourse with the 'bad' historicism of homogenous time through their shared progressionism.

The second element of Benjamin's critique of liquidationist logic involves the charge that its progressionism is inseparable from a dubious holism. The project of 'wiping away the traces' strives for the sheer integration of opposites: what is posited at the vanishing point is a locus of smooth, pure transparency. Benjamin toyed with such a vision in texts such as 'Erfahrung und Armut', yet recoiled from it in much of the *Passagen-Werk*. But we have seen how such an integrationist drive characterized Teige's thought from early on. The revised version of Teige's second 'Poetist manifesto' expressed with particular force this ideal of integration through its reconfigured understanding of *poesie* as the fundamental human creative and constructive drive, and it stands as a particularly clear expression of the liquidationist wish image that haunts Benjamin's texts:

The new *poesie*, as advanced schooling for the new human being, as a game of colours and lights, sounds and movements, is not a disinterested game: every game constitutes training and cultivation of particular instincts and is adapted to their functions. [...] The single, multi-faceted function of *poesie* as understood and prepared through Poetism is to endow, saturate, and reawaken human sensibility, to develop human capacities, whether sensory, sensual, or emotional [...]. Poetry for all the senses: not *l'art pour l'art*, but rather a significant social function for the construction of the socialist world. Therefore: Poetism as the overcoming of the antagonism between poem and world, a new synthesis of poem and world, a synthesis of construction and poem [*stavby a básně*]. [...] This is the vanishing point in the Poetist perspective.⁴⁰

pp. 83–167 (pp. 109–11); *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II*: 'Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: DTV; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), I, 243–334 (pp. 272–74).

39 Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', p. 397; 'Über den Begriff', p. 704.

40 Karel Teige, 'Poesie pro 5 smyslů, čili druhý manifest poetismu', in Teige, *Svět, který voní*

Teige's vanishing point marks a point in the future: an ideal to be pursued. Yet in Chapter Four we saw how Teige's Poetist ideal *had always* to remain in the future, for it encompassed the paradox that it could only be posited, never reached. If Poetism was ever understood to be 'there' it reduced to mere ornamentation, artistic doctrine, ideology, and thus pernicious supplement, so it was by necessity always just over the horizon (see pp. 156–58). This vanishing point thus constitutes the liquidationist wish image. It cannot be achieved, but it can certainly tantalize. Wish image — *not* prognosis, as Benjamin's Work of Art essay is so often understood, since a prognosis presupposes the attainability of what it foresees. In his letter to Horkheimer (see note 3) Benjamin used the image of the vanishing point to describe their present day of 1935 as the endpoint revealed by his historical material in the *Passagen-Werk*; yet in the Work of Art essay the aura has by no means vanished entirely but is still in the process of withering: the vanishing point, the endpoint, has slipped further into the future, as it always must. By contrast, in Teige's image the foreground is his present moment and the perspective he describes imagines development along a straight line into the future. At the endpoint of this progression aura is to have vanished, yet that endpoint can never be reached.

Set against this wish image, the conceptual tensions inhabiting the Work of Art essay — especially when juxtaposed with relevant claims in the *Passagen-Werk* — no longer appear to be ambivalence or elegiac mourning over the vanishing of the aura. Rather they reflect implicit critique of the liquidationist wish image: a wish image Benjamin shares yet partially resists. The 'ornamental' historical rags and detritus Benjamin wishes to utilize and thereby allow 'to come into their own' maintain their heterogeneous, fragmentary, and supplemental character, and thereby overtly flout the sacrosanct Constructivist image of peeling away and discarding the ornamental husk (*Hülle*) to reveal a structural core (*Kern*) and thus to arrive at 'authentic' and whole modern form. Benjamin flouts another Constructivist truism as well: the criticism of historicist architecture as engaging in a passive and parasitical practice of mere 'quotation' of past architectural vocabularies rather than composition of new ones. Although Benjamin does not make this precise terminological distinction (indeed neither German nor Czech contains this terminological pair) one might say that he replaces the modernist critique of historicism as passive *quotation* of the past with a materialist practice of *citation* of the past. 'Citing' the past — in the form of the rags and the refuse the materialist historian carefully collects as raw material to assemble through montage into a dialectical image — is in Benjamin's sense a powerful and creative cognitive tool: it is how the past becomes resonant or redeemed for the present. In this notion of 'citation' the *Passagen-Werk*, and 'On the Concept of History' especially, forcefully mingle materialist with theological elements: 'only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable [*zitierbar*] in all

(Prague: Odeon, 1931; facsimile reprint Prague: Akropolis, 2004), pp. 195–237 (pp. 236–37). The parallel here to Benjamin's discussion of film as a 'Testleistung' or 'test performance' that ultimately aims to ensure inhabitants of a technologized world 'a vast and unsuspected field of action'), is evident ('Artwork', pp. 111 and 117; 'Kunstwerk', pp. 365 and 376). See the discussion in Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, Chapter 5.

its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*.⁴¹ Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings have described Benjamin's 'theory and practice of citation' as follows: 'In *The Arcades Project*, to cite is at once to explode and to salvage: to extract the historical object by blasting it from the reified, homogenous continuum of pragmatic historiography, and to call to life some part of what has been by integrating it into the newly established context of the collection [...].'⁴² The theological framing of Benjamin's claims here has occupied a great part of the scholarly literature on his thought, but for our purposes what stands out is the revision of the avant-garde liquidationist discourse: quotation of the past is not reviled as the inability to produce original forms, but rather is reframed as citation that redeems the past for the present.

So what does this mean for the Work of Art essay, which undeniably invokes the liquidationist logic Benjamin equally undeniably questions? A response may lie in a single word. In the section of the Work of Art essay where Benjamin defines aura and outlines the process of its decline, he writes: 'And if changes in the medium of present-day perception [*Wahrnehmung*] can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay'.⁴³ The key word is 'Wahrnehmung', perception. Benjamin's argument in the Work of Art essay for the historicity of sense perception is well known: the human sensorium is not simply a natural or biological given but is historically determined as well. The idea that different historical periods generate different modes of interaction between individuals and the reality surrounding them was neither new (the notion is prominent in Marx) nor unusual (Teige's conception of a 'poetry for the five senses' is embedded in the same discourse). Benjamin's invocation of this thesis has generally been understood as a component of the claim that aura is a historically contingent category rather than an intrinsic property of art; the historical shift that reproducibility exemplifies, therefore, makes aura vanish because it no longer complements the prevailing structure of human perception. In short: aura is revealed as an ideological category in the process of being 'shed'.⁴⁴ But there is another aspect to Benjamin's attention to perception here that is less often noted, for Benjamin does not in fact state that the contemporary shift in the mode of perception reveals

41 Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', p. 390; 'Über den Begriff', p. 694.

42 Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 290. See also, for example, Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, p. 124; Hans-Jost Freytag, 'On Presentation in Benjamin', in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 139–64 (p. 146); and Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience', in *New German Critique*, 40 (1987), 179–225 (p. 190).

43 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 104; 'Kunstwerk', p. 354.

44 See, for example, Joel Snyder's summary of the 'aura as ideology' argument: 'An account of perception that fails to deal with ideology — with the stimulative capacity of ideas — will necessarily fail to explain why various qualities are attributed to objects and perceived as properly belonging to them, i.e., perceived as real properties of objects. Thus, for example, the perceived aura of objects has no immediate physical counterpart outside the human brain and cannot be explained biologically'; Joel Snyder, 'Benjamin on Reproducibility and Aura: A Reading of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility"', in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. by Gary Smith (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 158–74 (p. 164).

aura to be 'false' and thus results in its withering (which would be Teige's position). Rather, he claims that the contemporary shift in the mode of perception can be 'comprehended' through the idea of the vanishing of the aura. The decline of the aura, in other words, is not necessarily an objectively true development, but it is a necessary perception. Indeed, to regard aura as vanishing is the hallmark of the contemporary mode of perception. In the *Work of Art* essay he wrote: 'stripping the object of its husk [or 'veil': *Entschälung des Gegenstandes aus seiner Hülle*], the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception [*Signatur einer Wahrnehmung*] whose "sense for all that is the same in the world" has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique'.⁴⁵ Not an historical fact, but 'the signature of a perception'. This formulation pointedly skirts the question whether aura is truly withering, and thus whether in the future we will arrive at the point where it has vanished completely, but does confirm that such a conviction is the defining characteristic of the contemporary mode of perception.

The *signature of a perception*: here lies the distinction between Teige and Benjamin, between prognosis and diagnosis, between liquidationist logic and depiction of a wish image. The decisive point is not that Benjamin perceives aura to be vanishing: it is that he *cannot help* but perceive aura to be vanishing. This unavoidable perception is a wish image that Benjamin both shares and half-recognizes as historically conditioned. Saturated with utopian energy, this wish image underlies the *Work of Art* essay; yet that does not prevent Benjamin from surreptitiously imagining the Modernist monuments of steel and glass as ruins even while they are being built.

45 Benjamin, 'Artwork', p. 105; 'Kunstwerk', p. 355, translation modified.

CONCLUSION



Historical Integrity

In the Introduction I stated that the argument of this book operates on three registers: the personal, the theoretical, and the philosophical. In this Conclusion it remains to trace the broad trajectory we have seen on each register and to suggest some connections among them.

Teige's personal biography stands out as an exemplary twentieth-century fate in two ways, one inspiring and one disheartening. He came of age at the precise moment that war gave way to a sense of new beginning, and in Czechoslovakia that new beginning sounded largely in optimistic tones. Teige took encouragement from the foundation of the independent state of Czechoslovakia yet always remained critical; he never shared in the nationalist jingoism that proved such a temptation to so many. That he so quickly found the company of other people of similar mind and with such extraordinary gifts — people like Seifert, Nezval, Krejcar, Vančura, Toyen, Štyrský, and so many others — seems both improbable and inevitable. That a group such as Devětsil came together at the start of the 1920s is of extraordinary importance for Teige's development, as his nature was not that of the lone wolf, the prophet in the desert; to fully become himself he needed to be part of something larger than himself. The confluence of his own personal talent, those exceptional companions, and historical opportunity lends Teige's early adult life something of a fairy-tale hue: this is what a present-day observer first exploring this historical moment dreams of finding — and there it is. If Teige and Devětsil had not existed, it would be necessary to invent them. It is ironic that this group is so easily romanticized as embodying something like 'the spirit of their age', given that Teige's fierce materialism would bristle at such an idealist, Hegelian formulation. Yet it is clear that he did indeed understand himself and his companions as having grasped the moment — the tasks it demanded and the joys it provided — *correctly*. This conviction is often admirable and infectious, though it could also lend Teige's pronouncements, and especially his criticisms of others, an undertone of impatience and arrogance. At the same time it should be noted that Teige was neither self-serving nor pretentious, which so many of his contemporaries who deemed themselves to be at the forefront of cultural developments were. He sought out connections and companionship among prominent figures, often much more famous than himself, in order to reinforce the international network he saw at the centre of Europe's cultural and political future, but he was never star-struck.

All of the above does indeed help make Teige appear as ‘one of the most attractive personalities in the history of European modernism’, and an exemplary figure through whom to consider the interwar European avant-garde more generally.¹ For students of Czechoslovak culture the fairy-tale of Teige and Devětsil has perhaps been too alluring, and contemporary scholarship has been rightly concerned to explore other spirits of their age, that is, the figures and movements that have long stood in the shadow of Devětsil. Yet for the wider community of those interested in the European avant-garde, Teige remains for the most part little more than a name or, at best, someone else’s legend.

The disheartening side of Teige’s personal biography is no less exemplary. There is conviction and there is steadfastness, and then there is blindness. The degree to which Teige long remained loyal to a deluded ideal of the Soviet Union is probably the most challenging aspect of his biography for the modern observer to understand. Granted, we have hindsight; but it is equally true that evidence of the real situation was available much earlier than Teige admitted. This stubborn loyalty is perhaps partly understandable as the result of Teige’s historical and cultural paradigms being too neat, too coherent, too all-encompassing: everything seemed to fit. His image of the avant-garde as a transformative cultural force required that the Soviet Union be the liberating political force he wanted it to be. But one must also admit that one of the less attractive features of Teige’s nature played a role here as well: a tendency to dogmatism. Teige did not only draw lines for others to toe, he also dutifully toed certain lines drawn for him. That this dogmatic streak never completely overruled his critical judgment, and that he did eventually take a firmly courageous stance against positions and institutions to which he had devoted so much intellectual energy and emotional support is admirable. Too many of his contemporaries went in the opposite direction. The final years of his life, in which the bleak consequences of that critical stance were mitigated only through intimate ties and personal connections that could find no broader public arena, are also sadly exemplary for many mid-twentieth-century intellectuals.

On the theoretical register, there can be little question that Teige’s attempts to formulate a ‘unified-field theory’ of the interwar avant-garde, for all their fruitfulness, failed. This failure would lend support to the position described in the opening pages of this book, which sees the avant-garde as inherently pluralistic, theoretically disparate, and politically diverse. The very fact that Teige went through so many phases, which we have seen often involved paradox and contradiction, sometimes acknowledged openly and sometimes not, underscores the heterogeneity of discourses we attribute to the interwar avant-garde.

But Teige’s theoretical career does reveal patterns that speak beyond his personal case. Perhaps none is so prominent as the recurrence of dualisms in his thought and practice; indeed the major phases of his career are best summarized by the controlling platforms of Constructivism–Poetism in the 1920s and Functionalism–

1 Jean-Louis Cohen, ‘Introduction’, in Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská-Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2000), pp. 1–55 (p. 2).

Surrealism from the mid-1930s. As we have seen, these dualisms shift and slide the moment one tries to pin them down theoretically: there is no underlying master-dualism. This, too, speaks of theoretical heterogeneity. But what unites these conflicting dualisms is the relentless drive to *integrate*. Here Teige reveals something with expansive resonance for how we think of the disparate people and practices we understand to constitute the avant-garde. Underneath the rhetoric of breaks and discontinuity, the dramatic embrace of fragments and splinters, lies a *holistic impulse*. This runs so much against the usual ways of thinking about the avant-garde that, almost unavoidably, one reflectively dismisses it as a moment of faltering or weakness: a 'hunger for wholeness' or a nostalgia that is not able to accept fully the consequences of its own principles. Here the door seems to crack open towards regressive, even fascist paths, or towards vaingloriously mystical or utopian visions with a sacral tint. But to equate the holism that Teige's integrationist drive reveals with such positions is an error. Teige showed his mettle as a strict and stringent avant-gardist too frequently and too forcefully for the charge of nostalgia to be persuasive. Rather, it is incumbent upon us to accept how far holism and discontinuity, the ideals of totality and of fragment, can reinforce each other.

Here Teige may show something we can tentatively understand as a unifying ambition of the interwar avant-garde after all. I have argued that his integrationist drive needs to be seen as an attempt to connect with the present: rather than fetishizing either the past (as he felt most traditional cultural production did) or the future (as utopian thinkers did) Teige was passionately committed to his present moment. But he saw this task of integration with the present as a tremendously difficult one: it required openness to developments that overturned long-established practices, and the ability to see through false forms (or 'formalism') that tried relentlessly to cast the new in the familiar forms of the old. This is why the term 'historicism' came to play such a central role in his thought, well beyond the architectural discourse he originally took it from. Historicism constituted the main obstacle to recognizing the true forms of the present, and to seeing the present as a historical form. One might venture that this drive to uncover true contemporaneity, the real face of the present moment, is indeed a fundamental, defining ambition of the interwar avant-garde more generally. Such an ambition by no means precludes the stance of radical rejection of one's contemporaries, of heroic isolation at the cutting-edge of history, that so many avant-gardists assumed for themselves; such a stance simply presumed that everyone else was benighted by their own private historicism. Only radical rejection of not only the past, but also of anyone deemed unable to discern the true features of the present, would bring recognition of and integration with one's present moment as a true *historical* phenomenon. Given that the avant-garde 'rejection of history' was so often proclaimed in shrill tones and has become such a truism in later accounts, such an ambition sounds jarring. But — as with the continuity between holism and fragmentation — the case of Teige helps clarify this ambition.

With these reflections on historical identity we have already entered the philosophical register of Teige's thought. Here the main trajectory I have sketched

extends from Herder through Nietzsche to Benjamin. I aimed to show the striking logical parallels that Herder and Nietzsche used in their defences of, respectively, the turn towards History and the turn away from historicism: parallels involving a positive vision of 'life' (*Lebenskraft*) and a critical conception of 'formalism'. While their rhetoric was similar, the attitude towards History underwent an almost complete reversal: during the century separating these two thinkers *History* shrivelled into *historicism*, a mere parody of its original self; for Nietzsche historicism was utterly inimical to the historical spirit properly conceived. Nietzsche still recognized a 'proper conception' of history — but this most avant-gardists forgot. This bequeathed the major paradox that underlay the early twentieth-century avant-gardes: unwittingly, their rejection of History constituted the reinsertion into the historical. Teige was fully in thrall to this paradox — in fact few thinkers of the interwar European avant-garde exemplify it more clearly than he. For this reason he represents an effective foil to Benjamin's late thought, which I argue undertakes a hesitant unravelling of the confusions about the relation of History to historicism that the Herder-Nietzsche trajectory had implanted in avant-garde discourse. It is this unravelling of History from historicism that leads to some of the most striking and at first sight baffling aspects of Benjamin's attempts to position himself within the contemporary avant-garde discourse: his devotion to the historical 'detritus' reviled by liquidationist logic, or his recovery of a practice of citation that is active and creative rather than passive and parasitic. To the degree that it is ever helpful to judge in such blunt terms, I would argue that Benjamin is 'right' here, Teige wrong; yet Benjamin's own inability to free himself entirely from the wish image he was among the first to diagnose indicates how compelling that image was. Teige's fallibility, grounded in and giving full expression to a fundamental modernist ambition, reflected the courage of his convictions and the integrity of his intellect.

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