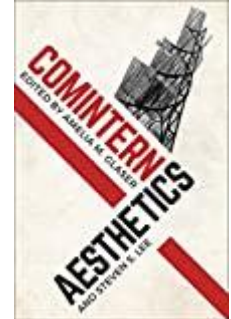


Amelia M. Glaser, Steven S. Lee, eds. *Comintern Aesthetics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Illustrations. xxi + 563 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-0465-6.



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In *Comintern Aesthetics*, editors Amelia M. Glaser and Steven S. Lee include sixteen diverse chapters that seek to “remap world literature and culture from the perspective of world communism” (p. 3). In a timely and welcome collection, the contributing authors grapple with failure—of the Communist International (Comintern), of the Soviet political project, and of artists, whether avant-garde, modernist, socialist realist, or in between—to fulfill the internationalist promises of world revolution. This failure of international communism in the twentieth century is what the collection is fundamentally about, and as the editors rightly remind us, “we must recognize the virtue of failure” (p. 12).

Nothing embodies both the material failure of the Comintern project and the utopian vision it engenders in artists all over the world to this day like the Tatlin Tower, an architectural project for the Comintern headquarters of grandiose proportions and complex ideas, designed by painter Vladimir Tatlin. The elaborate building was never constructed because of the diminishing importance of the

Comintern, as well as the fact that the leaning design was physically impossible to erect, something that continues to fascinate architects, artists, and academics alike. Many chapters of this volume share this fascination with Tatlin’s proposed headquarters (a schematic of which adorns the book cover), whether by referring to it in passing or analyzing it in more detail, from the editors’ introduction to Vladimir Paperny and Marina Khrustaleva’s chapter toward the end of the book, noting that the monument’s political importance as the seat of the Comintern is often ignored in favor of a strictly artistic analysis. The mission of the chapters instead, whether explicitly or implicitly, is to pay equal attention to the art and the material and political conditions within which it was created.

The chapters are tied by several threads that together form a highly coherent whole, while at the same time maintaining a variety that makes for a pleasant reading experience. The art history thread is central; the book is fascinated by transition, from avant-garde and modernism to social-

ist realism, from Culture One to Culture Two. Moreover, the chapters explore how these transitions took place nationally and internationally within the Comintern orbit. In the first chapter, for instance, Harsha Ram analyzes the extent to which the transition to socialist realism was made by the avant-gardists, finding elements of the latter, Culture Two, in the former, Culture One. At the other end of the volume, Evgeny Dobrenko moves the narrative forward to the steady decline of socialist realism in the years after the death of Joseph Stalin and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

The chapters also share a focus on uneven development, an exchange of information between different regions, countries, and parties at different stages of “development,” whether artistic, political, or economic. Used slightly uncritically from an apparent linear perspective, this theme nevertheless correctly accentuates the unevenness of the Comintern aesthetic at the global level, the different approaches it engendered, and the sometimes contradictory processes that were borne out of the attempts at implementing and developing it. Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez and Masha Salazkina, for example, contribute a new perspective on Spanish film culture in chapter 4 by exploring the transnational connections between Mezhrabpromfilm, the Workers’ International Relief film studio, and Spanish artists in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Sarah Ann Wells’s chapter 5 similarly explores the Brazilian case, focusing on the effects of the global promise of Soviet rhetoric on Brazilian artists, just as they were searching for ways to engage the broader Brazilian population rather than a narrow slice of intelligentsia. The artists’ journeys of delving deep into international communism before rejecting it outright or moving away from it to explore other possibilities again reminds the reader of the constant state of transition that characterizes the Comintern aesthetic.

In chapter 7, Nariman Skakov’s proposal of complicating Paperny’s influential conceptualiza-

tion of Culture One and Culture Two is one of the most emblematic chapters of the volume. Originally, Paperny argued (in *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* [1985]) that the personal tastes of high-ranking Soviet decision-makers could not account for the sweeping changes that resulted in the transition to socialist realism. Rather, it was emblematic of a cyclical pattern occurring throughout Russian and Soviet history, in which a vibrant and forward-looking Culture One is replaced by a hierarchic, backward-looking, and closed Culture Two. This is then replaced by Culture One, and so on. This interpretation was proposed as a tool to help more deeply analyze Russian and Soviet history, rather than a claim to be the exact cause of the transition. Skakov proposes a conceptual change by introducing Culture One and a Half, a transitional state between the internationalist One and the isolationist Two. In doing so, he shows how Soviet writers, such as Andrei Platonov, blended elements of socialist realism and avant-garde to remain relevant within the evolving Stalinist political system but retain the flair of internationalist emancipatory rhetoric. At the same time, the nature of this rhetoric, and by extension of this transitional phase, was orientalist, as avant-gardism turned toward the East in the 1930s: Culture One and a Half was “primarily preoccupied with the racially coloured Soviet periphery, where the Bolshevik policymakers tested and refined key ideological tools that were essential for the formation of Culture Two” (p. 236).

This idea is certainly appealing. Transitions are complicated and liminal by definition, therefore allowing for a more complex and messy reality. Building on the work of Terry Martin and Yuri Slezkine, this perspective translates Platonov’s work about “the East” from a Russian perspective as the poster child for Culture One and a Half, similar to how the aforementioned scholars interpreted the complex layers of Soviet policy and psyche in Central Asia and other peripheries.[1] As more recent work, exemplified by Adrienne Edgar and Adeeb Khalid, has showcased, however, Cent-

ral Asians not only had important roles in negotiating the meaning of Soviet policies but were also at the forefront of directing the Soviet transformation of their region.[2] Following in these parallel political footsteps, I look forward to authors building on the idea of this transitional stage and exploring the interpretations of the work of Central Asian artists about Central Asia and Soviet transformations.

The exchanges between the authors of this volume are at points explicit. Paperny himself also contributes a chapter cowritten with Khrustaleva, responding not only to Skakov's earlier analysis of transition but also to the broader "attempts to soften Paperny's rigid structuralism" in other works (p. 449). In chapter 14, the authors recognize this rigidity and entertain the idea of transition but insist on the fact that Culture One and Culture Two remain in contradiction throughout the history of Russia and its various guises. Their chapter explores, in particular, the importance of religion and Orthodox Christianity in both constructions, as both used rhetorical and aesthetic elements of religion in different ways.

I particularly would like to highlight chapter 10—Jonathan Flatley's work on Langston Hughes's Black Leninism—as an excellent example of research that is nuanced and timely. Flatley interprets Hughes's anti-lyrical poetics as searching for the means to not only "represent black people to black people" but also to imagine new collective forms of optimism and opposition in the face of white supremacy (p. 314). This analysis is highly prescient given the 2020 protests against police brutality in the aftermath of George Floyd's death in the United States and beyond. As Flatley notes, "the black radical tradition offers a formidable set of lessons [for] the ongoing need to invent or improvise genres for opposing and surviving white supremacy" (p. 313). The reaction to the protests made it clear that this need is indeed ongoing in the United States and the rest of the world, and this chapter provides an excellent example of aca-

demical research that can at once be an analytically coherent contribution to literature and a call to political action.

Building on this call, chapter 15, by Katie Trumpener on the struggle between leftist media and far-right reaction, appropriation, and ultimate dismantling of this vibrant multimedia culture in Berlin, reminds us of the dangers of allowing far-right organization in public spaces, whether physical or digital. This is another timely contribution. Chapter 12 offers instead Kate Baldwin's in-depth analysis of Alice Childress's 1950-55 column in Black radical newspaper *Freedom*, showcasing how revolutionary Black activism in the United States collided with internationalist communist aesthetics, particularly by providing space for Black female writers. In her columns, Childress blended the false division "between the literal and the literary, or between information and story," providing societal commentary by centering the voices of Black female domestic workers as part of both the international working class and a Black groupness in the United States, referring directly to what is missing from bourgeois feminism of the twenty-first century (p. 401).

In conclusion, it is important to note that this review only focuses on these particular chapters as a way of providing a look into the themes and histories this volume explores rather than as a judgment of their relative quality. Katerina Clark, Snehal Shingavi, and Tony Day contribute three excellent chapters on language and translation with a focus on Asian writers in China, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam, while Xiaobing Tang, Amelia M. Glaser, and Christina Kiaer elected to focus on theater in wartime China, Yiddish poetry in Spain during the Civil War, and attempts at anti-racism in Soviet film, respectively. These excellent case studies would be of particular interest to specialists. Overall, I would highly recommend this volume not only to specialists in aesthetics and poetics but also to a wider audience inter-

ested in deepening its knowledge about international communism in the twentieth century.

In broader Comintern literature, I would argue that this volume is positioned well within the connections between the Soviet central machine and the geographically widespread writers, artists, communists, and activists who plugged into Comintern aesthetics. Recent literature has cemented the point of view that central control was an important feature of the institution, but it was far from totalizing. The volume explores both the writers and artists who felt pressured into changing their approaches to fit new aesthetic directions from above, as well as those borrowing and interpreting them as they saw fit.

The volume's final chapter—"Workers of the World, Unite!"—acts as the concluding reminder. Exploring the connections between interwar artists and modern Chinese performers, Bo Zheng teases out the ever-present friction of art versus activism and highlights its origins in the margins of Chinese society. Ending the chapter, and the volume, with a series of pointed questions about the direction and revolutionary potential of socially engaged art of working people within a global capitalist system, he provides a platform for further research to those interested in building on these questions, as well as food for thought to those interested in answering them. The failure of the Comintern haunts the present but also provides building blocks for the future.

Notes

[1]. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 414-52.

[2]. Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolu-*

tion in the Early USSR (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

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