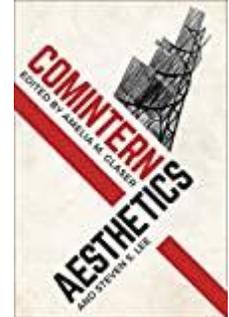


Amelia M. Glaser, Steven S. Lee, eds. *Comintern Aesthetics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Illustrations. xxi + 563 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-0465-6.



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In the popular conception, Communist art means socialist realism: statues of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, muscular workers with hammers, and peasants with tractors. *Comintern Aesthetics*, edited by Amelia M. Glaser and Steven S. Lee, attempts to complicate this view. Their goal (according to Lee's introduction) is "to remap world literature and culture from the perspective of world communism—that is, from the perspective of a leftist, anti-capitalist modernity that ascended in the years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution"—and to focus on this "alternative modernity" embedded in "the cultural and political networks emerging from the Comintern [that] have long outlived its 1943 demise" (p. 3). The sixteen chapters that comprise *Comintern Aesthetics* attempt to map out Comintern modernism, its development, and its relationship to the socialist realism that came after. The focus is largely literary, although there are chapters on film, painting, theater, and architecture. Historians of Communism (both in specific countries and internationally), literary critics, art historians, and other

scholars should find much to engage in this thought-provoking collection.

It should be noted that despite its title, *Comintern Aesthetics* does not focus on the Comintern itself. Instead of looking at the Communist International as a flesh-and-blood organization, with its own executive committee, congresses, functionaries, and publications, most contributors focus on the Comintern's penumbra, comprising movements and individuals influenced by international Communism. Consequently, instead of looking at the official aesthetic policies of the Comintern, the book examines what the editors call "the aesthetics of communist internationalism" (p. 531). There is no attempt to provide a synthetic history of the Comintern or argue that there was an official Comintern aesthetic, at least before the consolidation of socialist realism in the 1930s. This loose conception means that the authors are not constrained by a particular time period. Instead, they can examine how, since "the Soviet-centred Comintern itself only lasted as a bureaucratic entity between 1919 and 1943, the utopian art that

organization fostered would continue to thrive, inform, inspire” because “at the core of the Comintern was a translocal proletarian movement that used art and literature to imagine and spread communist ideology, aiming to consolidate a worldwide revolutionary class” (p. 530). In other words, this allows contributors to examine writers or artists who had no official links to the Comintern but who were influenced by the Soviet Union or Communism in a broad sense.

From the point of view of examining art and literature, this expansive focus makes sense. Yet, at times, I wished that there was an attempt to ground the chapters in a more concrete examination of the Comintern as a “bureaucratic entity.” To be sure, the contributors frequently cite and engage with historians of the Communist movement, but I found myself often wishing for a more straightforward linear narrative of historical developments in the Comintern or individual Communist parties. (Although the helpful nine-page chronology compiled by Dominick Lawton is useful to help offset this weakness.)

*Comintern Aesthetics* is an example of the transnational approach to studies of Communism that has become more popular in the last several years. Russian and Soviet writers and artists figure prominently but so do their counterparts elsewhere, especially in what today would be called the Third World or the Global South, and what the Comintern in its time would refer to as the colonial and semicolonial world. For example, there are chapters on the influence of Soviet cinema in Spain in the 1930s and on Soviet art’s influence on Brazilian artists in the 1930s. There are several studies that focus on how Communist modernism was refracted in more than one country, for example, how the defeat of the 1927 Chinese Revolution was reflected in German, Russian, and Chinese writings, and how the Spanish Civil War affected Yiddish poetry. A strength of the volume is that it includes several chapters examining the intersection of the Communist aesthetic with Com-

munist anti-racism, including Kate Baldwin’s examination of Alice Childress’s column in Paul Robeson’s *Freedom* newspaper, Christina Kiaer’s chapter on anti-racist short films, and Jonathan Flatley’s chapter on Langston Hughes’s “Black Leninism.” This transnationalism helps expand the understanding of international Communism and the impact of Communists (in this case, mainly writers or artists) in one country on those elsewhere.

Like any such collection, some of the chapters are stronger than others, and many raise more questions than they answer. The individual chapters in a collection like this must be evaluated on two levels. First, they are a proof-of-concept. In this sense, the volume succeeds: the chapters show that the subjects touched on are worthy of discussion and research, and the fact that they raise questions underlines the fruitfulness of such scholarship. Second, however, each chapter must be evaluated in its own right as a discrete contribution. Several of the chapters in the book are less successful in this regard. Many of the chapters seem top-heavy or bite off more than they can chew. A typical chapter begins with a broad theoretical framework (on world literature or translation, for example), moves to a history of specific Communist efforts, and then discusses some case studies. This is understandable, but it has a tendency to make the book as a whole less readable. There are also gaps: for example, except for the chapter on Brazil, and to a lesser degree the chapter on Yiddish poetry and the Spanish Civil War, Latin America is not dealt with, despite the importance of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros in formulating a pro-Communist aesthetic in the 1930s. Yet even the weakness of many of the chapters points to the overall project’s strength: one hopes that many of the projects contained in *Comintern Aesthetics* will be expanded by their authors into full-blown books, which would allow the contributors more room to deal with their subjects with the depth that they deserve. And the fact that a reader can

come up with subjects of Comintern aesthetics that are not examined in this volume points to the vitality of the volume's perspective. All this is to say that the book often seems to be the start of an investigation rather than the end product.

And to be clear, many of these chapters deserve to be developed. Just to give two examples: Sarah Ann Wells's chapter on Brazilian modernism and the Soviet Union in the 1930s examines the attraction that the Soviet Union posed to artists and intellectuals in Brazil who "often looked to [Soviet] models of national or regional autochthony, not only to reinvent art and make it new but often as a creative if problematic solution to the problem of underdevelopment" (p. 183). Glaser's chapter on the Spanish Civil War in Yiddish poetry analyzes how "Jewish writers who identified ideologically with the Comintern-sponsored International Brigades found in the [Spanish civil] war a theme not only for the progressive rationalist worldview but also a reason to address via communist revolution a history of trauma dating back to the fifteenth century" when Spain expelled its Jewish population (p. 282). While I found these two chapters particularly interesting—perhaps because both deal with Latin America—they are not unique in posing innovative questions about Communist-inspired art in the early twentieth century.

Unlike a Communist publication, of course, each author has his or her own viewpoint and does not express a common "line." Still, the book as a whole raises some questions. One common theme is that Comintern-inspired movements offered a sort of alternative modernism. By offering examples, the various chapters back up this vision. Yet it would be useful to interrogate this Comintern modernism more. For example, what was the relationship between Comintern modernism and more traditional modernist perspectives—especially since the right-wing political sympathies of some modernists (such as Ezra Pound) are well known? Similarly, several of the contrib-

utors seem to agree that the modernism of the early Communist movement should not be seen as counterposed to the later socialist realism but seen as overlapping. The question of the relationship between these two forms of Comintern aesthetics bears more examination.

In summary, *Comintern Aesthetics* broadens out the study of art and the Communist movement and forces the reader to rethink the role of Communism and art in the twentieth century. Read individually, the chapters will be invaluable to researchers of particular political, historical, or cultural movements. One hopes that the book's contributors pursue their research and that their work inspires further research by others. Read together, the book taken as a whole suggests new areas of research and new ways of looking at its subject.

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