

Meghan Forbes

Ann Arbor, University of Michigan / Freie Universität, Berlin

In the Middle of It All: Prague, Brno, and the Avant-Garde Networks of Interwar Europe

My dissertation seeks to broaden our understanding of what has come to be widely called the “historical avant-garde” (as coined by Peter Bürger) to incorporate lesser known — but what I show to be equally important — sites of literary and artistic production in Europe. *In the Middle of It All: Prague, Brno, and the Avant-Garde Networks of Interwar Europe* shows how a group of leftist Czech artists and intellectuals in the interwar period engaged dialogically with peers around Europe. Specifically, the dissertation links the work of Devětsil — a group of young Czech writers, artists, architects and actors founded in December 1920 and led by Karel Teige, who came to be well known internationally — with other concurrent sites of artistic and intellectual production, namely the Bauhaus in Germany and Surrealism in France, as well as with artists in other countries, such as Poland, Yugoslavia, and Hungary. By looking at what I call the private avant-garde — as manifest in letters and personal photographs, clippings from magazines and essay drafts — as well as publicly circulated materials — such as serial journal publications and other printed matter — I reveal the strategies that Devětsil employed via correspondence, travel, publishing platforms, and typographic innovation to foster mutually influential networks of exchange across the continent. The outcomes of this exchange, or rather, exchanges (private, public, in print and via travel) are manifest in a very specific kind of internationally recognizable aesthetic. For example, typographic considerations in the name of “New Typography” were aimed at facilitating an international dialogue, and embodied modernist conceptions of perception in its characteristically stripped down, non-ornamental design and use of visual cues to convey information non-textually, thus lending itself to reception and adaptation abroad.

It is the aim of this dissertation to point out and challenge gaps in our popular, western-centric understanding of the interwar avant-garde and to encourage further scholarship that paints a more representative picture of the period, giving voice to the many groups involved. While the dissertation focuses on the impact of the Czech milieu, artists of other countries also played a sizeable role in the development of trends in interwar art and literature and were actively engaged in the networks I describe. This project then invites a revisionary way of thinking and writing about the methods by which ideas were exchanged and made manifest across continental Europe in the interwar period, incorporating the influence of under considered countries into the preexisting discussion of well known movements. Its implications are universal, in that it incorporates a multiplicity of centers into an account of interwar art and intellectual production in Europe, so that in essence, the concept of the center is made obsolete. Additionally, by incorporating both a literary and art historical approach, and describing a network conducted across international borders, *In the Middle of It All* is especially pertinent in our contemporary moment, as the humanities move towards more interdisciplinary methodologies.