

ITALIAN FUTURISM AND THE BAUHAUS THROUGH THE LENS OF HUMANISM.

**IVETA SLAVKOVA'S RÉPARER
L'HOMME. LA CRISE DE
L'HUMANISME ET L'HOMME
NOUVEAU DES AVANT-GARDES
AUTOR DE LA GRANDE GUERRE
(1909-1929), LES PRESSES DU RÉEL,
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One might think that there is not much more to add to the study of the now canonical vanguards of Italian Futurism and the Bauhaus. This is a book that will prove one wrong. Revisiting the European avant-gardes with new approaches can offer us the possibility of finding new ways of thinking about what might be thought of as exhausted and crystalised within the master narrative. Iveta Slavkova's book proposes looking differently at Italian Futurism and the Bauhaus, reconsidering and counteracting established considerations that associate these two artistic movements with dehumanisation through thorough research that focuses on the Great War as having a pivotal role in the definition and construction of both avant-gardes. This art-historical investigation takes advantage of the extensive literature that has been produced in the last decade about the First World War that brought new research to light and which thus requires a reconfiguration of art historiography about the canonical avant-gardes. It does so by resorting to a transdisciplinary approach, which

analyses visual art and literature, considering historical research as well as anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis and politics, and, of course, art history.

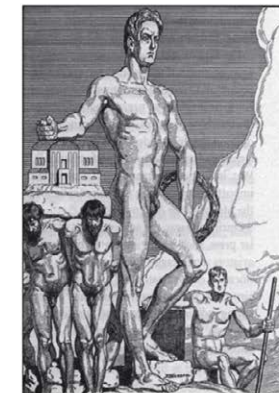
This book's chronological interval – 1909-1929 – goes, nevertheless, behind and beyond the years of the First World War, taking into account the structural narratives that were forged to justify the war before and after it happened and how the avant-gardes took part in that narrative. Furthermore, it looks at how their artistic visions and proposals were part and parcel of the arguments that made the war.

Slavkova's point of departure is, however, a more recent date. In 1952, Camille Bryen and Jacques Audiberti introduced the concept of *abhumanism*, which they took from the Italian Beniamino Joppolo's book *L'Abumanesimo*, published in 1951. This neologism was created to break with humanism, the prefix *ab-* meaning 'to separate', 'to move away'. The term was the outcome of criticism towards rationality, scientific and technological

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Réparer l'homme

La crise de l'humanisme et l'Homme nouveau des
avant-gardes autour de la Grande Guerre (1909-1929)



les presses du réel

progress and, in general, towards human centrality in all activities, which had resulted in violence and disaster. The author also mentions Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, published shortly before in 1947, and very much aimed at Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, which criticised Man's centrality and appealed to an overcoming of humanism, pushing aside all the ideas of predetermined conceptions on human essence, nature, world, history, and relying on nothing else but human subjectivity. The main question for abhumanism and anti-humanism was to understand that the human place in the universe had to be decentred because of the catastrophes that had taken place in the first half of the twentieth century, which had been made in the name of humanism. That is, man (and in this discourse, women do not represent humanity) had been seen as the cause and consequence of all destructive action. As Slavkova writes: "It is precisely that fanatical attachment to humanism which will cause, after the second massacre perpetrated at the heart of civilisation, the anti-humanist reaction of Audiberti, Bryen and Heidegger" (p. 38).

This critique came after five hundred years of Western anthropocentrism, and it is far from resolved today, though, in the last decade, it has been developed into a larger debate with further consequences to both science and the humanities. Slavkova's book does not make such a journey to present-day debate on the Anthropocene, but it does assume as a starting point the unease with humanism-as-anthropocentrism that spread after two world wars. That signifies reframing Futurism and the Bauhaus in the humanist light and analysing their enterprise as a response to a crisis of humanism that actually reinforced it.

Their project to improve humankind through art – and to create a new man – was inscribed in the Western industrial ideology of progress and desire of totalising, civilising and mastering the world, which in turn was a modern version of the "[Western] man as the centre of the universe" cultivated since Renaissance. This was renewed with the French Revolution and intensified by the industrial revolution, with the idea of a superior man by means of technology (we can recall that this was the topic of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818). Moreover, with the loss of influence from the Church, man could take God's place in modelling humans into an improved version of themselves, and the avant-garde artist was to produce the suitable model to look up to.

As Slavkova writes, these avant-gardes saw the Great World War as an opportunity to put into practice their project, and they participated actively in the "culture of war" (a term coined by historians Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau), even by openly promoting it, as did the futurists, or by seeing it as necessary to overcome decadence and install a more spiritualised existence, as some of the Bauhaus protagonists defended.

In the first chapter, Iveta Slavkova analyses the mechanisms that produced the general consensus about the civilising, and therefore humanist, mission of war. There was a huge propaganda machine before and after the war that contributed to the mass adhesion to the First World War, very much based on the production of images, by way of photographed postcards, posters, illustrated magazines and cinema, and all the techniques of manipulation, staging and montage that came with them. On

both sides of the war, what was at stake was a conflict of civilisation against barbarism. If the French and British saw themselves as the heirs of European civilisation against German barbarism, the German side felt like the true guardian of European civilisation brought into decadence by France (and the USA used a salvation rhetoric as if the war were a modern crusade). The enemy was seen as culturally inferior and dehumanised, while the opposite side saw itself as representing the superior modern man. After 1918, the sentiment was that the war, despite the terrible loss of lives, had contributed to the purification of nations and was an opportunity to rebuild Western civilisation. The image propaganda was also crucial to organise national mourning by unifying personal loss in a national loss with patriotic purpose. The author speaks of the acceptance of the "mass death" in the name of a "war myth" for which the "cult of the unknown soldier" as a sanctified, perfected, virile model symbolised the unity of the nation, and was an example of the national race, sacrificed in the name of the country. Slavkova observes how cultural and intellectual spheres worked before, during and after the war to construct such a sentiment, such as writers and artists (Fernand Léger and Thomas Mann are two of the examples mentioned, as well as Goncourt Prize-winners whose books glorified war). She pays particular attention to Ernst Jünger, whose writings are considered by some authors as anti-humanist, for opposing the Enlightenment values and parliamentary democracy. Following on from experts Julien Hervier, John King and others, Slavkova considers his ideas a "humanism made of steel" (p. 77), which played a major role throughout the several books he published based

on the notes he took at the front, in the building of the “myth of war”. In fact, his maximum “war is the mother of all things” shares the view that the conflict has a purifying effect that allows a new superior man to emerge from it. Jünger justifies cruelty and destruction as part of a hidden order that governs war, necessary for accomplishing a transcendent intent of revitalising the human being.

The aestheticisation of the war (in which Jünger took part) and its connection with the emergence of nationalism and Nazism would be criticised by Walter Benjamin, whom Slavkova mentions further in the book (p. 284), without, however, going deep into the work of the German philosopher. It must be said that Benjamin does work against the grain of the dominant thesis of this book, so even at the risk of resorting to an over-cited author, it would be interesting to confront his views on modernity and the Great War with the humanist quest on which Slavkova focuses. Nevertheless, Slavkova is sufficiently careful to present intellectual and artistic examples on both sides of the trenches (for instance, for Ernst Jünger, she examines the French counterpart Charles Maurras, or Henri Massis and Oswald Spengler), underlining the differences, but also identifying the project of a new repaired man as common ground. Another common ground is an idealised Classic Antiquity as a model to return to, with antecedents in French classicism (David’s *Marat*, for instance, was a construct of an revolutionary ideal of classical beauty) or in Joachim Winckelmann’s praise of Greek sculptured bodies which he saw both as beautiful and as a symbol of moral superiority. It was based on this neo-classical ideal that the unknown soldier’s body was reconstructed in

the collective imaginary. As the author shows us, Futurism and the Bauhaus proclaimed an amplified version of the same classical model. This leads to the connection between these ideals reconfigured in the twentieth century regarding the male body, enhanced by technology and the evolution of the discipline of art history, which developed grounded on Winckelmann presupposing the ancient, male, white, idealised body as a model. Although it is not this book’s focus, reading it does make it clear that there is a history of the discipline of art history to be made from the non-humanist perspective.

One of the aspects more deeply analysed is the paradox between cosmopolitanism/universalism and nationalism, which fuelled the First World War. Each nation’s own narrative of superiority justified their quest as universalist — they were leaders commanding humankind to a more perfect society. This is the same kind of perception that an artist such as Marinetti had of himself and the Italian Futurists’ role. As Slavkova points out, Futurism was a vitalist ideology, which first appeared as an artistic movement but which later, in 1918, constituted a political party, soon absorbed by the fascist party of Mussolini. The context of Italy’s late-nineteenth-century unification is key to understanding Marinetti’s association of the avant-garde with rebirth, a Renaissance or *Risorgimento*. Although the author mentions how the 1909 Futurist manifesto enacts this rebirth and industrial baptism (later signalled in Boccioni’s famous sculpture *Unique forms of continuity in space*) by describing the emergence of the narrator from an accident in a pit filled with detritus from a nearby factory, she omits the well-known essay by Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde”. Written and

first published in 1982, it precedes the works by Giovanni Lista or Fanette Roche-Pézard, or even Hal Foster, quoted by Slavkova. Even though the *October* authors have since overwhelmed art-historical writing of the twentieth century, the Krauss essay played a pivotal role in reconfiguring the concept of the originality of the avant-garde. No longer should *original* be associated with the idea of “never done before”, but rather with the will to be born again, to go to the source and restart humanity. Therefore, it is an essay that confirms the author’s argument, and we cannot but notice its absence in this book.

In chapters 2 and 3, Iveta Slavkova thoroughly examines how Italian Futurism and the Bauhaus were part of the humanist discourse that laid behind and beyond the First World War, revisiting and discussing, and sometimes contradicting, aspects of the master narrative about them. Furthermore, she pays attention to characters and works previously overshadowed and, even more important, she places them in relation to the larger context of these avant-gardes, analysing differences and similarities between them. Therefore, Slavkova examines deeply some of Marinetti’s literary production (especially his first novel, *Mafarka the Futurist*, 1910), and the role he played in the war propaganda (including on the front, where he performed for the soldiers reading his warlike phonetic “words in liberty” poems), along with its association with eroticism and male virility, which served as argument to dismiss the need for women. She analyses the paintings of Luigi Russolo, Gino Severini and Umberto Boccioni, and the sculptures of the latter, paying attention to details such as the baptismal cross in the well-known *Unique forms of continuity in space* (1913), which stands for

the total (unique), dynamic, active, new man embarking on a futuristic crusade.

Regarding the Bauhaus, Slavkova analyses its leaders, from Gropius's first ideas on collective labour for improving society, marrying a collective artisanal methodology heir to William Morris's Arts & Crafts, to industrial technology with the goal of standardised and low-cost production to make modernity available for all. With the idea of designing the modern house and furniture came the idea of designing the modern man. The de-hierarchisation of the arts proclaimed by the Bauhaus meant, more than the equality between the arts, the quest for a total work of art that could impregnate life and be an inseparable part of it. Iveta Slavkova's book discusses the changes in the Bauhaus logo and the internal changes that came with it, as well as other artists and leaders of the institution, along with works such as Hannes Meyer's *Co-Op* projects, of such severe austerity that one might think of it as dehumanised spaces, but in fact conceived as a prototype capsule or house-machine to enhance humans. Despite political differences (and the author recurs to Fredric Jameson's "illusion of Marxism" definition to explain Bauhaus's cause of cutting off alienation factors from life), we can find the analogy with the modernity baptism claimed by Futurists: the Bauhaus was creating the environment for the rebirth to take place. As Slavkova writes: "Both can be interpreted as a form of absolute humanism, a triumphal rational anthropocentrism that radically changes the environment" (p. 273). Other authors subjected to Slavkova's analysis include the less known Johannes Itten, a follower of occultism and mysticism, particularly the religion of Mazdaznan, which defended the purity

of race and authoritarian tendencies. Itten, who ended up clashing with Gropius, had a significant impact on the Bauhaus teaching methodology, bringing modern pedagogy theories. He conceived the *House for the White Man* in 1921, which takes the Bauhaus glass paradigm to a new level, combining it with ascendent geometry to accommodate a supreme being – the "white" artist, the colour "white" being a symbol of purity which bears with it blatant racism. In the Bauhaus, opposite political tendencies flourished.

Slavkova refers to how it has been easy to associate Futurism with fascism (something she discusses as a more complex relation than usually presented) and, in contrast, the proximity of the Bauhaus utopia and that of Nazism being harder to admit (p. 340 and ff). Of course, the fact that the school was closed by the Nazis allows us to see it as a symbol of freedom for art practice that could not be tolerated by totalitarianism. However, their totalising universalist views and their quest for a new aestheticised man were part of the context in which Nazism rose. As the author mentions further in the book, Oskar Schlemmer's works from the 1920s and early 1930s often depict the Nazi salutation.

Other points of contact between Futurism and the Bauhaus that this book explores are their views on the role of the artist – as a leader, with a more or less demiurge impetus, that has the mission to conduct society as a modern Prometheus into a rebirth of civilisation – and how this was in fact a response to mass culture. The avant-garde emerged when it was felt necessary that art had to speak to larger audiences and engage them in modernity, and the artist could play the clairvoyant role of the prophet.

Another point worth noting, addressed by Slavkova, is the way Futurism and the Bauhaus saw women. Although both movements defend women rights (and in Futurism, we also see the proclamation of sexual liberation and the manifests of Valentine de Saint-Point speaking on behalf of the Futurist woman), in reality, their focus on the renewing of humankind focuses on man, only he able to be a leader. They see the emancipation of women as a masculinisation path to become more similar to men. Futurists are also paradoxically misogynistic, since they feel war can replace women in providing an erotic experience, as mentioned before. In Marinetti's novel, *Mafarka* gives birth to a child he has generated only by will, in an analogy of the self-sufficient creative force that drives the futurist artist.

Before making some final comments on the epilogue, I would like to highlight two more topics of research addressed in this book. One can be found in the pages dedicated to the "aviator" as the epitome of both the new man and the avant-garde artist, and emulated by artists from Robert Delaunay to Giacomo Balla, and also later on in the Italian Futurist-derivative *aeropittura*.

The other moment can be found in the Bauhaus puppets of Oskar Schlemmer, an artist who also fought in the war and to whom Iveta Slavkova dedicates several pages of her book. She explores his depictions of human male/androgynous figures standardised by elemental geometrical features that connect the depiction of man to an architectural plan. He works in dance and theatre projects, such as *Raumtanz* (1926), where dancers (himself and two assistants) are dressed in uniforms and masks that do precisely what they are named after: uniformise the

bodies as equal. Schlemmer actually designs a course called “The Man”, in which he expresses his studies and ideas that ultimately present a vanguard interpretation of the Vitruvian man made famous by Leonardo da Vinci. It all sums up to his *Kunstfigur*, “art figure”, an idea of art that presents itself in the shape of a new man. This *Kunstfigur* could be freely manipulated like a puppet on the theatre stage and scenery, which became central to rehearse the Bauhaus utopia (Slavkova relates the importance of the Bauhaus theatre to the difficulty of opening the architecture studios until 1927). Based on elementary geometric figures in primary colours and black and white, *The Triadic Ballet* dancers-as-puppets presented a progressively abstracted sexless human figure, a prototype of the purified human.

Slavkova resumes: “The Oskar Schlemmer’s puppets, but also Marinetti’s Gazourmah or other aviators are supposed to have a power multiplied by the machine. However, these new Men do not oppose the humanist paradigm, as much as the terms ‘machine’ and ‘abstraction’ do not automatically mean ‘dehumanisation’ or ‘anti-humanism’. On the contrary, they are the modern idols that master the standardisation and rationalisation procedures that govern the world. Their freedom lies in the presumed absolute control they exercise over their bodies, their consciences and their environment. [...] they affirm the demiurgic superior centrality of man and the possibility of reinventing humanism after the modern apocalypse of World War I” (p. 354).

In the epilogue, Iveta Slavkova names Dadaism and Surrealism (especially that of George Bataille’s *Documents*, 1928-29) as alternatives to humanism, which did not commit

the “epistemological mistake” regarding the Great War and the cult of the new man that Futurism and the Bauhaus did. Even though we can relate to her arguments, one cannot but think that Slavkova turns into exceptions the avant-gardes that the North American *October* authors also praised as an alternative to the master narrative of modernism (we could add Georges-Didi Huberman’s work on Georges Bataille and *l’informe*). Those authors, who are almost entirely absent from this book, forged a new narrative on modernism that elected avant-gardes previously dismissed by Clement Greenberg as the significant artistic forces of modernity. Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Yve Alain-Bois and others, constructed a new narrative, which dethroned the previous one and soon became the new master narrative on the twentieth-century. In this epilogue, Slavkova ends up reinforcing this master narrative, even though she does it through the prism of humanism and its chagrins.

Furthermore, did Dada and Surrealism really decentre man? I am not so sure, taking into account all the variants of Surrealism and Dada and their peripheral developments. It is perhaps a too complex issue to be introduced in an epilogue.

This book does not analyse other European Futurist movements or the repercussions of the Bauhaus, and it is not its aim to do so. However, it does become imperative to consult this work when studying the ramifications of these avant-gardes. For instance, often and inevitably, Marinetti’s Futurism was reinterpreted and recreated in other places. Such was the case in Portugal, where the Italian avant-garde had a huge impact, but the approach to it was tainted with parody (and Fernando Pessoa’s “intersectionism” and

“sensationism” were approaches to Futurism and cubism that changed them profoundly, resulting in a small, local avant-garde which practised new ways of art and poetry-making).

Iveta Slavkova’s book patiently and thoroughly reconfigures the art historical narrative of canonical art from a non-canonical approach. Frequently, art historians find that, by looking more closely at a consecrated artist or artistic movement, they are forced to change perspectives and question their and others’ views on the chosen subject. Slavkova has taken that matter seriously and has done paramount work in retelling Italian Futurism and the Bauhaus history through the lens of humanism, which has allowed her to both reframe those avant-gardes but also to pursue a critique of humanism itself. From now on, her work should be taken into account in any study of Futurism and the Bauhaus and their proliferation throughout the world.

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