

THE INTER-, TRANS- AND POSTNATIONALITY OF THE HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE

INTRODUCTION

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Art and literature existed long before the nation. Yet, when the nation conquered European political thought and cultural practice in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, art and literature in their modern shape soon became inextricably bound to the nation. Moreover, as in Herder and Hegel, art and literature became the sublime manifestations of the nation, with national poets serving as the ultimate spokespeople of the nation, national painters creating icons of national virtue and national history and architects refurbishing the proclaimed national habitat in an assumedly national style.

As inter- and transnationality were obvious features of the historical avant-garde, acknowledged in the common labelling of the avant-garde as ‘international’ or ‘European’, it is often presented as a development which ran against the national grain. The avant-garde indeed possessed an international structure as a transnational network of artists from many different countries. In pursuit of a new art of an international provenance that aspired to the transgression of or simply seemed to ignore existing national – linguistic, ethnic and political – borders and division lines, these artists were involved in multiple cross-border initiatives, collaborating closely, often touring from one country to another, living and working in different countries, publishing in reviews which were frequently multilingual and participating in exhibitions and conferences which were explicitly international. The inter- and transnationality of the avant-garde was intended by many avant-garde artists as a conscious move against or away from a national or nationalist understanding of the arts. An obvious example was Kurt Schwitters, who called for a new supranationality (‘Übernationalität’) which transcended previous ‘particular’ nationalities and nationalisms.¹

This inter-, trans- or, in the case of Schwitters, even supranationality as a basic feature of the avant-garde was reinforced *ex negativo* by more hostile responses to the transgression of the national by the avant-garde from a

¹ Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk*, vol. 5, pp. 197-198.

wide range of divergent nationalist perspectives. As a recurring element in the conservative rejection of the international avant-garde – in its most drastic way in the German national-socialist campaign against the assumed degeneracy of avant-garde art – criticism of a nationalist provenance paradoxically contributed to the international aura of the avant-garde. The nationalist detestation of the avant-garde thus reinforced in a negative way its historical status as an early twentieth-century transnational anticipation of the current-day trends – in Habermas's terms – towards a 'postnational constellation' in the European arts.²

Although internationality was indeed the core business of some sections of the avant-garde, there can also be no doubt that the international aura of the historical avant-garde as an augury of contemporary transnationality tends to outshine the no less obvious presence of nationalism and the national in political opinions, in programmatic reflections and in the artistic practice of the transnational network of the historical avant-garde. In this, specific national backgrounds often played an important role and outspoken nationalist perspectives circulated, sometimes in opposition to internationalist positions, sometimes in a paradoxically intertwined way with a no less outspoken internationality. This was not just a negative ambition to overcome nationalism and the national, as in Schwitters's pursuit of supranationality. While his stand might have been typical for some sections of the avant-garde, at the same time, the national was not always rejected as a viable framework.

In fact, several movements, groups and individual artists within the avant-garde combined an transnational praxis with a nationalist programmatic or aesthetic conceptions derived from regional cultural practices, which might be labelled national. An obvious case is Italian futurism, which operated in the transnational arena but was aligned simultaneously with Italian fascism. Elements of nationalism and the national can be found in many other avant-garde isms as well, sometimes in a rather implicit way, sometimes – like Italian futurism – in an explicit association of aesthetic avant-gardism with nationalist conceptions, as in Serbian zenitism and in some parts of the German expressionist movement. In some cases, the combination of avant-garde aesthetics and national or nationalist politics even led to a critical refutation of the internationality of other sections of the avant-garde, as did *Der Sturm* editor and Bauhaus professor Lothar Schreyer, who to some extent reversed the internationalist rejection of nationality as a relevant category, as articulated in the same journal by Schwitters.

In many, if not all fields, the avant-garde was marked by strong heterogeneity, in aesthetic matters, for example concerning essential issues of

² Habermas, *Die postnationale Konstellation*, pp. 91-169.

mimesis and representation, as well as in relation to questions of autonomy, the unification or reunification of art and life, and also other cultural, social and political questions. This unmistakable – diachronic and synchronic – diversity of the avant-garde can also be observed with regard to nationalism and the national. In fact, many different shades and amalgams of inter and transnationality and nationalism are apparent in divergent constellations across the historical avant-garde in Europe and beyond. This might seem surprising in the first instance, since the national and the transnational – or at least nationalism and internationalism – seem to exclude each other. On second glance, however, inter- and transnationality did go hand in hand with nationalism, sometimes with clear-cut frictions, sometimes, though, in surprising harmony. Apparently, inter- and transnationality on the one hand and nationalism on the other could be opposites but they were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Internationality as a basic feature of a modern globalised world

The growing transnational cultural coherence in Europe and beyond, as it can be observed today, is obviously related to the emergence of a postnational constellation in political, social and economic spheres – to European unification as well as the continuing process of globalisation. Whereas globalisation is often regarded today as a relatively new development, triggered in the first place by the electronic media revolution of the past decades and the emergence of the internet, there are many indications that the greatest leap forward in this process of globalisation did not occur in the late twentieth century but in fact in the late nineteenth century. As John Gray argued in an interview on Dutch television some years ago:

Globalisation has two quite separate meanings.

In the sense of globalisation which is used by politicians and people in business, what it really refers to is a world in which there are no barriers to the free movement of capital or trade. It really refers to a particular economic regime, which is probably not much more than a decade old, which didn't exist before the fall of the Berlin wall or China's partial opening to the world market.

So in this first sense, the sense in which globalisation is used by politicians and business people, it refers to something very recent and it refers to a particular way of organising world markets and of organising the world economy. But there is a deeper meaning of globalisation which I think should be its true meaning, where it refers to the linking together of cultural and political as well as economic events throughout the world by distance-abolishing technologies.

In this second and deeper sense, globalisation refers to the integration of activities throughout the world by technologies which abolish or curtail time and distance. In our lives and in this second, deeper sense globalisation goes back at least to the 1860s and 1870s when the telegraph, through underwater transatlantic cables, permitted markets in Europe and North America to be linked instantaneously for the first time. So the first thing we need to understand about globalisation is that although in ordinary public discourse it refers to something recent, something which is perhaps ten years old or which at most goes back to the period after the Second World War (...) that's a narrow, and shallow view of it. It goes back a lot further, it goes back to the last quarter or third of the nineteenth century, in which new technologies were already making the world one place. So it can be argued for that reason and other reasons that the late nineteenth century, although not as rich or technologically advanced then as we are now, was more globalised than we are today.³

On a practical level, as far as the avant-garde is concerned, this first wave of globalisation was in many respects of paramount importance. The possibility of new, faster means of transport enabled avant-garde artists to adopt a nomadic existence, travelling at a hitherto unthinkable speed and ease from one place to another by train, steamship or, from 1900 onwards, by car. These changes also allowed the rapid communication and circulation of ideas, be it by telegraph, telephone or postal services which carried letters and printed material throughout Western and Central Europe often in just a few days, a speed only surpassed in recent decades by fax and e-mail. The rapid alternation of isms, the rapid shifts from one concept to another which were characteristic of the early avant-garde, is unthinkable without these new possibilities in transport and communication. As travel distances crumbled away, the journey from Amsterdam to Berlin which took a week or even longer at the beginning of the century was reduced to around twelve hours by train. Similarly, connections between other cultural centres throughout Europe were made dramatically easier. This development was an essential precondition for the emergence of a transnational Bohemian subculture at the end of the nineteenth century. So-called artists' Bohemia could be found in artist colonies throughout Europe – in metropolises such as Paris, Munich, Vienna, St Petersburg and Berlin as well as in countryside locations such as Worpswede, Ascona, Skagen and St Ives – the breeding grounds of the early avant-garde of the twentieth century.

In *The World Republic of Letters* (1999), the French literary historian Pascale Casanova argued that Paris can be seen in the late nineteenth and

³ Van Veelen, 'Interview with John Gray'.

early twentieth centuries as the location of a 'world literary space',⁴ a global literary market place. Paris served as the arena of a transnational literary field which transcended national borders and individual languages, with French in a double role as the local literary language *and* lingua franca. While Casanova confines her observations to literature, the early avant-garde had its point of gravity in the visual arts and could also be found in the musical and performing arts such as ballet and drama, along with literary writing. Were we to include these fields, Casanova's 'world literary space' might be rebaptised 'world cultural space', which definitely had a centre in Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, whereas Casanova, in a typically French way, suggests that Paris and only Paris was the *locus* of 'world literary space', it seems doubtful whether Paris was as unique and singular as claimed. There were other places that also served as *loci* of world cultural space. Berlin, for example, might not have had the Parisian global air, but in the Weimar period it was definitely another location where transnational exchange took place, at least on a European scale. As Herwarth Walden suggested in an article in *Der Sturm* in 1923, Berlin could be seen as the capital of the 'United States of Europe', 'where the Russians live in the West, the Germans in the South and the Italians in the North. A city in which the Germans speak French, the Russians German, the Japanese broken German and the Italians English'.⁵

As in the case of Casanova's singling out of Paris, Walden's presentation of Berlin as the *omphalos* of Europe was undoubtedly an exaggeration. Nevertheless, Berlin was certainly a city that harboured European or even global cultural space, again with a strong, heterogeneous avant-garde community that included artists and writers from across Europe as well as from other continents. In addition, many other locations also harboured, for a time at least, a transnational global or at least European cultural space, such as Paris, as mentioned, but also Weimar with its Bauhaus, and Munich, in particular before the First World War, or Zurich, Prague and Barcelona, to name just a few that served as pivotal market places in the transnational network of the avant-garde.

Globalisation not only facilitated the emergence of this international avant-garde in a practical way. As the social geographer David Harvey pointed out in his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), the human conception of external reality and, as a consequence, human culture as such, was and is to a considerable extent influenced by the experience of time and space. In agreement with John Grey's location of a first major wave of globalisation in the nineteenth century, Harvey points to the historical fact

⁴ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 4.

⁵ Cited in Mühlhaupt, *Herwarth Walden*, p. 85.

that this experience of time and space underwent a fundamental change in the second half of that century due to the world becoming smaller and smaller, notably through the further expansion of capitalism in the age of imperialism, with its exploitation of resources, production and markets on a global scale. In this context, Harvey argues that 'European space was becoming more and more unified precisely because of the internationalism of money power'.⁶ Beyond the sphere of economics, other modes of understanding and representing time and space were also becoming outmoded:

The expansion of the railway network, accompanied by the advent of the telegraph, the growth of steam shipping, and the building of the Suez Canal, the beginnings of radio communication and bicycle and automobile travel at the end of the century, all changed the sense of time and space in radical ways. This period also saw the coming on stream of a whole series of technical innovations. New ways of viewing space and motion (derived from photography and exploration of the limits of perspectivism) began to be thought out and applied to the production of urban space (...). Balloon travel and photography from on high changed perceptions of the earth's surface, while new technologies of printing and mechanical reproduction allowed a dissemination of news, information, and cultural artefacts throughout ever broader swathes of the population.

The vast expansion of foreign trade and investment after 1850 put the major capitalist powers on the path of globalism, but did so through imperial conquest and inter-imperialist rivalry that was to reach its apogee in World War I – the first global war.⁷

The trend towards European unification at an economic level created, according to Harvey, a crisis of representation: 'Neither literature nor art could avoid the question of internationalism, synchrony, insecure temporality, and the tension within the dominant measure of value between the financial system and its monetary or commodity base'.⁸ In this context, Harvey, relying on Roland Barthes, points to Flaubert and Manet, who in the mid-nineteenth century had already explored:

(...) the question of representation of heterogeneity and difference, of simultaneity and synchrony, in a world where both time and space are being absorbed under the homogenising powers of money and commodity exchange. 'Everything should sound simultaneously, [Flaubert] wrote; 'one should hear the bel-

⁶ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 262

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 262-263.

lowing of the cattle, the whispering of the lovers, and the rhetoric of the officials all at the same time'.⁹

As far as this simultaneity is concerned, one might say that Flaubert, in curious way, anticipates the principle of simultaneity, which can be found – elaborated in different ways – in the early avant-garde, be it cubism, futurism or expressionism, as well as in Dada.

Internationality as emblem of modernity

It was not only the practical organisation of cultural life and, in particular, that of the avant-garde, nor only the aesthetic practice and reflection of this avant-garde, that were affected by, or at least responding to, the ongoing many-faceted process of the internationalisation and globalisation of social and cultural life – and of economics and politics – which had resulted in the compression of time and space in the common perception. These processes also left their traces in the self-understanding and self-presentation of the avant-garde, considered as a configuration of different groups and schools of artists and writers in pursuit of a radical new art which had to reflect the radical changes in the rest of society.

Internationalisation and globalisation were widely recognised (and idolised) as basic features of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity. Typical is the symbolic practice of 'world exhibitions', held in Paris, London and other capitals with global pretensions. Against this background, the avant-garde was also marked by an ostentatious, sometimes even showy, internationality in its ambition to be up-to-date, modern and even more than modern in every respect. For example, they followed and appropriated the latest inventions, be they scientific, philosophical or technical (most evident in the case of the futurist obsession with fast cars, planes and trains ascending the highest mountains).

This ostentatious internationality or – one might call it – cosmopolitanism not only reflected the practical, organisational transnationality of the avant-garde considered as a network with extensions in different countries and continents. On a practical level it also reflected the nomadic character of the avant-garde, the circulation of artists, works of art and artistic concepts and ideas. It also served on a programmatic level, in what Bourdieu called the symbolic capitalism of the cultural field, as an affirmative emblem of one's modernity.

The ostentatious internationality had a double objective: the avant-garde claimed and regarded themselves as not only having an artistic, aes-

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 263.

thetic mission but also a mission encompassing the transformation of humankind and the world as a whole. This sense of internationality was, in a way, meant to underline this claim of the aesthetic avant-garde as the forerunner not only in the artistic field but in society as a whole, considered not just locally or nationally but inter- and transnationally, on a global, universal level, as apostolate of a renewed modernity based on aesthetic principles.

To some extent, this ostentatious internationality was undoubtedly influenced by the internationalism of the contemporary socialist workers' movement or, for example, the Esperanto movement flourishing at the time, but it was likewise nourished by what Harvey called the 'internationalism' of modern, imperialist capitalism. In particular it was based on the awareness that modern life was increasingly assuming an international, global character. Simultaneously, an obvious difference between transnationality and cosmopolitanism, considered as the insignia of modernity, and the internationalism of the socialist and Esperanto movement is apparent. Whereas the latter 'internationalisms' were conceived as counterparts or alternatives to conceptions of the national, nationhood and nationalism, ostentatious inter- and transnationality as insignia of modernity did not necessarily interfere with these conceptions. This internationality is not necessarily internationalist. On the contrary, many cases can be found in the avant-garde in which ostentatious modernist internationality was anything but internationalist, coinciding with a decisive nationalism. This is the case for the Italian futurists, Serbian zenitism, Flemish expressionism, and in Breton's version of surrealism as well as his chauvinist position-taking and mobilisation of xenophobic sentiments against the internationalist Dada movement of the Romanian Jew Tristan Tzara.

As transnationality could be internationalist but was not in this capacity marked by internationalism, an obvious similarity can be observed between the use of the labels 'international' and 'European'. 'Europe' was and is often used as a label countering or replacing nationalist frameworks. 'European thought' and the 'European idea' are often seen as alternatives to national parcelling, overcoming conflicts between single European nations. The label 'Europe' has also been used, however, in other ways – as an instrument to exclude sections of the continent (socially, culturally, economically, politically or religiously) as not truly European, such as in discussions about Russia's and Turkey's relationships to the European Union or in the marginalisation of the Muslim immigrant populations in several European countries. Interesting here, for example, is an article by the well-known Dutch philologist Jan de Vries, who published an article in the German periodical *Europäische Revue* entitled 'Betrachtungen über eine europäische Literaturgeschichte'. Amongst other things he states:

A European literary history is also an unconditional demand of the present, which has come to the insight of an organic unity of the European continent. For several millennia, vivid cultural exchange has marked the relationships between the peoples of the old world, as documented both by stylistic forms of prehistoric ceramics and intellectual movements of historical times. In the field of cultural life no epoch can be found which is not marked by a similar character across a large part of Europe: be it the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Enlightenment or the Romantic period. Led by this insight, we should review the past in order to understand the emergence and growth of European unity in intellectual matters, and a phenomenon both necessary and confined to a certain space.¹⁰

This may sound quite contemporary but was actually published in January 1944. For the informed reader, moreover, ‘a phenomenon both necessary and confined to a certain space’ (‘eine notwendige und raumbedingte Erscheinung’) provides food for thought concerning De Vries’s intentions and the political context. De Vries’s referential framework was the national-socialist ambition to unite Europe under German rule. It would be as absurd to suggest any correspondence between the united Europe under Nazi rule and the current-day European Union, as it would be to assume anything more than an accidental correspondence between Berlin as the capital of the Third Reich and its satellites and the vision of Berlin as the capital of the United States of Europe articulated by Herwarth Walden two decades earlier. The case of De Vries indicates, nevertheless, that the label ‘European’ as such does not necessarily stand as an alternative to, let alone exclude, a nationalist perspective. ‘Europe’ existed and exists in many varieties – and the same holds true for the international.

¹⁰ De Vries, ‘Betrachtungen’, p. 15: ‘Eine europäische Literaturgeschichte ist auch eine unbedingte Forderung der Gegenwart, die sich ja gerade zur Einsicht in die organische Einheit des europäischen Kontinentes durchgerungen hat. Die Völker der alten Welt haben seit Jahrtausenden in regem kulturellem Austausch miteinander gestanden; davon zeugen nicht weniger die Stilformen der vorgeschichtlichen Keramik als die geistigen Bewegungen der historischen Zeit. Es gibt auf dem Gebiete des kulturellen Lebens keine Epoche, die nicht für einen großen Teil Europas einen gleichartigen Charakter zeigt: Renaissance oder Barock, Aufklärung oder Romantik. Von dieser Einsicht geleitet, müssen wir die Vergangenheit betrachten, damit das Wachsen und das Werden der europäischen Einheit auch in den geistigen Dingen als eine notwendige und raumbedingte Erscheinung verstehen lernen’.

The avant-garde as postnational constellation between transnationality, internationalism, nationalism and nationhood

Comparable and to some extent compatible with the concurrence of different versions of the nation, nationhood, nationality and nationalism – based, for example, on the occurrence of single-state territories, linguistic division lines, some supposedly distinctive cultural homogeneity or ethnic or racial chimera – several versions of inter- and transnationality which transcend the national in one way or another can also be found, sometimes expressed by different, yet frequently overlapping and even synonymous, labels such as cosmopolitanism, internationality, transnationality, supranationality and anationality, which all imply the transcendence of the national as a pre-given framework. Regarding the avant-garde, at least three related, but not identical, phenomena might be distinguished: firstly, the previously outlined, practical transnationality facilitated by the first wave of globalisation in the nineteenth century: the avant-garde as a transnational network. Secondly, this practical, material form of transnationality was often ideologically flanked by different modes of internationality considered as emblems of modernity. As described above, the general recognition of internationalisation and globalisation as basic features of modernity led to their idolisation as insignia of the new times. The obsession of the avant-garde with the idea of being more modern and more advanced than others paved the way for an ostentatious, showy internationality, which corroborated the practical transnational dimension of the avant-garde without questioning as such the national as a viable concurrent framework. Thirdly, alongside this internationality as a sign of one's modernity, another mode of internationality might be distinguished, for which the term 'internationalism' could be used. This is the same internationalism as found in the socialist workers' movement, an internationalism that opposes nationalism and rejects the nation as a viable concept.

Here, it is important to note that nations as separate entities, be they defined through language, through state borders or other political structures or through some form of ethnicity or cultural communality, are not natural age-old phenomena but cultural constructs of rather recent date. The concept of nationhood may have had its roots in the eighteenth century but only began to flourish in the nineteenth, not least as a justification for the rise and existence of 'national' empires and 'nation' states, and to a considerable extent also as a reaction against the process of globalisation and internationalisation. With regard to these nationalisms on the one hand and the internationalism represented by – among others – the socialist movement on the other, an ongoing debate involving political, social, economic and cultural questions can be seen to have been underway since the nineteenth cen-

ture, concerning the issue of whether or not the concept of nationhood, or nationality, should be regarded as a sound framework at all.

A decade ago, Jürgen Habermas qualified the contemporary political situation – in which much authority had been transferred and relegated from nation-states and national governments to inter-, trans- and supranational governing and policymaking bodies such as the European Union, the IMF, NATO and the United Nations – as a ‘postnational constellation’ in which, as can be observed throughout Europe, nationalist counter-movements are anything but phenomena of the past. In a reverse manner, one could argue that, at least on a cultural level, the avant-garde can be seen as a utopian anticipation of this postnational constellation in a historical context, in which nationalisms still determined not only the political but also the cultural landscape and agenda in Europe and beyond.

As in the case of postmodernism reflecting modernism in a critical way, the postnational stance of the avant-garde, or at least of sections of it, always included a reflection of the national as a pre-given omnipresent cultural construct, which might be rejected but never denied as a given grid of modern culture in the widest sense.

Outline

This volume is divided into two parts. In the first, the inherent conflict between transnationality, internationalism and nationalism and the omnipresence of nationalism – as a concept that partially contrasts with and is partially concurrent with and even leads towards internationalism – is addressed in three panoramas of the European context by Timothy Benson, Hubert van den Berg and Geert Buelens respectively.

In the second section, the tension and paradoxical oscillation between inter- and transnationality in their different forms and concepts of the nation, the national and nationalism in the context of the historical avant-garde is a recurring feature in a *tour de horizon* of case studies. These start with Celia Aijmer Rydsjö and AnnKatrin Jonsson discussing the international praxis of the transatlantic journal *Transition*, which was marked by an absence of nationalism. As Benedikt Hjartarson subsequently points out, this stands in contrast to the predominant role of nationalism in the emergence and reception of the Icelandic avant-garde. Torben Jelsbak’s article on semi-Dada in Denmark, Beate Störckuhl’s reconstruction of the role of Polish and other Central and Eastern European architects in the creation of an architectural ‘International Style’, Vojtěch Lahoda’s reevaluation of the role of the art critic, Vincenc Kramář, in the establishment of Czech cubism, the discussion by Éva Forgaács of the problematic of international allegiances, internationalism and nationalism in the German and Hungarian settings,

as well as the overview by Dimitrios Kargiotis of the Greek adaptations of foreign avant-garde developments, all show how transnational avant-garde movements were both incorporated into different national and regional settings and also faced national and nationalist reservations throughout Europe, from the far north to the furthest south.

Local, regional and national contexts as well as different ideological constructs of regionalism, nationalism, inter- and transnationalism not only determined the historical manifestations of the avant-garde but had and still have their impact on the historiography of the avant-garde, as this volume shows. In addition, this historiography was and is above all marked by the East-West division that split the European continent in two for almost half a century after the Second World War. The Iron Curtain not only divided Europe politically but also constituted a cultural determinant, as a barrier that was difficult to permeate, blocking not only contemporary cultural transfer but also erasing an imagination and memory of an undivided Europe which had not yet been marked by the line drawn in Yalta and Potsdam. As such, the Iron Curtain also impeded and impedes our retrospective view of the historical avant-garde, creating an East-West divide in its historiography. Emanating in Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, the early historiography of the avant-garde privileged Western European developments, ignoring and excising Eastern and Central European impulses which had been an integral part of an avant-garde that had emerged in a Europe which knew of borders and regional differences, but of a different kind, notably in the Central European zone of what would become the so-called 'Eastern Bloc' after 1945, where the 'new' nation-states arose before and after the First World War in the region where the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires had previously met.

This specific historical-historiographical problematic of converging and conflicting local national or nationalist particularities and transnational trends is addressed by Lidia Gluchowska in her epilogue, discussing current approaches to a new, more adequate historiography of the European avant-garde in the new context of a reunited Europe, a historiography which transcends the divisions imposed by the Cold War and simultaneously acknowledges regional features which might reveal specific traits of the Central European avant-garde.