Book Reviews

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"It takes so much money to be a Bohemian today," wrote novelist Maurice Barrès in 1888. Jerrold Seigel's similar sensitivity to Bohemia's contradictions generates his provocative analysis of the relationship between alternative and mainstream societies. By following several artists' quests for widespread social acceptance, as well as exposing the bourgeois logic beneath the Bohemian equation of lifestyle with art, Seigel shows how Bohemia embraced a society it outwardly rejected. He also demonstrates the bourgeoisie's fascination with a subculture it deemed vulgar, suggesting that the mainstream used Bohemia as a place to vicariously transgress social conventions.

The cabaret, a central Bohemian icon with the ability to draw its membership from both worlds, comes under especially rigorous critique: while it originally symbolized Bohemia's independence from official culture, it became a place of unabashed careerism and the dissolution of artists' talent in the easier arts of idleness, drinking, and scene-making. Seigel is especially resourceful in spotting opposition to aspects of Bohemia from within its own ranks, describing both Baudelaire's rejection of Bohemia for
the more productive intoxication of sustained creative work and Rimbaud's attack on its romanticism. Seigel's own analysis of how Bohemia broke down once it moved into politics is also on target. The failure of the Paris Commune, he argues, demonstrated that Bohemia couldn't overcome the disorganization produced by its myriad egoistic forces and construct a solid revolutionary movement.

These discussions, as well as generous chapters on Courbet, Murger, the Goncourts, Verlaine, Jarry, Apollinaire, and many less well-known figures, compose a penetrating work of history—bringing the anxiety, duplicity, and disillusionment of Bohemia out from behind its mask of insouciance.

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Eugen Weber's study is better read in conjunction with a book like *Bohemian Paris* than on its own. While Weber deliberately restricts himself to "surface phenomena" and quotes Merimee to support his belief in the historical value of anecdotes, his book never adds up to more than a long footnote. His range is broader than Seigel's—he reports what the rest of France was doing while Paris' Bohemians sparred with its bourgeoisie—but he lacks Seigel's depth, reporting hundreds of curious facts, yet analyzing only a few.

Weber is strongest when he compares the intellectual and artistic explosions in the capital with the daily struggle for food, water, and shelter in the country, suggesting how trivial vanguard culture can seem when it remains blind to the suffering around it. He also points out how parochial contemporary readers can be when they remember only the period's art. Weber's arsenal of facts and figures has the cumulative effect of ridding the era of the seductive glow a century's distance confers upon it. It's hard to be nostalgic about an age rife with disease, dirt, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and class warfare. Weber shows us that the last fin-de-siècle was no better than our own.

*The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*

Marjorie Perloff

University of Chicago Press; 288 pp.; $24.95 (cloth)

The "moment" in the title marks the sensation of possibility that Futurists felt when they encountered technology's utopian promise. Marjorie Perloff's encounter with their work vibrates with a similar dynamism. She constructs a network of correspondences among disparate examples of Futurist culture—revealing, as did the Futurists themselves, a simultaneity of experience that dissolves outmoded critical boundaries.

Perloff focuses on four major types of Futurist "rupture"—linguistic collage, visual collage, the artist's book, and the manifesto. After identifying
the unique manner in which each development snubbed the academy, she assesses the contribution each made toward Futurism's common goal, a "new technopoetics of the twentieth century." Perloff begins by linking Picasso’s and Malevich’s collage to Cendrars’s conflations of geography in his voyage poems, Marinetti’s parole-in-liberta, and Ezra Pound’s imagism. Following the painter’s lead, each writer loosened verse from logical constructions and rediscovered the force of independent, carefully juxtaposed words. In the meantime, Russian Futurists were adapting these ideas to book publishing, making the page “a field of action” that combined drawing, a range of typography, and a layout that ignored the linearity of conventional texts. All these elements eventually characterized the manifesto as well, which in the hands of the Italians became a new art form. In her book’s strongest chapter, Perloff explains how “talking about art became equivalent to making it,” finding in 1913’s “manifesto fever” the period when theory first came to occupy the same privileged sphere as literature. The similarity Perloff perceives between this erosion of boundaries and postmodern thought helps shape a final section devoted to Futurism’s influence on the work of those artists who blend elements of high and low culture, as well as on Smithson’s and Barthes’s writing and (briefly) performance art. For many artists, Perloff explains, technology no longer symbolizes progress but ruin: “science has become the myth of science.” By gauging that change, Perloff shrinks the distance between old and new culture that much current criticism maintains.

Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture
Bram Dijkstra
Oxford University Press; 453 pp.; $37.95 (cloth)

Some readers may wonder whether a male critic’s study of the images of women in art necessarily represents the same voyeurism and fetishism it means to critique. Happily, Bram Dijkstra’s book does not. He makes innovative use of familiar feminist critical thought as he discusses hundreds of paintings (and some novels) from the turn of the century, explicating the misogynist ideology behind their alluring imagery. After addressing the damage art did to society, he comments on the effect criticism has on art: Dijkstra’s technique of interpretation forcefully asserts his distance from those formalist critics who, by overlooking ethically-dubious content, tacitly endorse it.

Dijkstra’s tightly-woven argument recreates the stages by which misogynist logic imprisoned women. He shows how economic necessity conspired with science and sociology to promote an image of subhuman woman—a figure that enabled middle class businessmen struggling for power at work to assert easy dominance at home. Artists then illustrated this popular science with images of sleeping, sickly, and sedentary women. Popular art magazines soon reproduced them, completing the dissemination of the ruling class’s idea of social Darwinism. Dijkstra is especially good at showing how the culture twisted even feminine independence into
a sign of evil: male artists imagined a rebellious woman's strength as hiding avarice, bestiality, or nymphomania. Perhaps most indicative of misogyny's pervasiveness are the many women artists Dijkstra finds embodying the same attitudes as their male peers. He also juxtaposes popular art with the supposedly more sophisticated work of Klimt, Cezanne, Manet, and others. Placing their stylistic innovations aside, Dijkstra exposes their thoroughly conventional ideas about women.

At the end of a long chain of depraved women, fin-de-siecle men found the murderous Salome and called for retribution. In his conclusion, Dijkstra turns what has been an entertaining cultural history into a frightening warning by detecting within the period's art a subliminal call for genocide. He then argues a daring thesis: that this need for revenge was linked to the genocide which came shortly after the fin-de-siecle. Dijkstra is persuasive. Quoting scientists who place women and Jews together on the evolutionary scale, Dijkstra shows how misogyny and anti-Semitism grew out of the same male fear of losing power. Unwilling to kill their wives, he says, men substituted the Jew.

Dijkstra's reasoning throughout is most effective in forcing contemporary admirers of this sort of art to examine the reasons for their fascination. The current fashionability of the era—fueled by Vienna 1900 exhibits and the like—has turned once vitriolic propaganda into aesthetically-pleasing art objects. Dijkstra returns his readers to a position of critical distance from this art so that by understanding the artists' intention, they can reject it.

*Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885-1925*
Frederick R. Karl
Atheneum; 456 pp.; $30 (cloth)

Karl's ambition is impressive and his mind's resources seem bottomless, yet after 450 pages, his book's yardage defeats its clarity. He aims to sum up modernism through mere accumulation, crowding together figures, works, and events in art, science, and politics to suggest the parallelism of their separate histories. Yet only literature gets his full attention; the other disciplines are usually referred to only as they support developments in prose and poetry. Karl often rushes past whole fields of activity with the sparsest of critiques (theatre is barely mentioned at all), only to stop and award one work a protracted analysis. If Karl had not attempted such an impossible synthesis and instead restricted himself to one area, he might have produced a concise study with far-reaching implications. Instead, *Modern and Modernism* becomes a lengthy list that, finally, is reductive.

Still, a patient reader will find much of value here. Karl helpfully spells out the major modernist concerns—the nature of the self, the tension between outer reality and inner experience, and the loss of a coherent social order—as he answers his book's larger questions: what was modern, how did it differ from the avant-garde, and finally, what, if anything,
distinguishes modernism from postmodernism. He sensibly proposes a set of modern motifs which he then tracks in a range of work: among his best sections are those on "journeys into," "purifications," and "the instinctual life," as well as a thoughtful chapter on "spiritual autobiography." What gives these sections force is Karl's clever juxtaposition of modernist initiatives with examples of subsequent anti-modern backlash. The invective of Kraus, Weininger, and Nordau enables Karl to vividly suggest the profound tremors which modernism sent through fin-de-siècle society.

*Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting, and Performance, 1890-1914*
Peter Jelavich
Harvard University Press; 403 pp.; $29.50 (cloth)

*Literary Life in German Expressionism and the Berlin Circles*
Roy F. Allen
UMI Research Press; 404 pp.; $59.95 (cloth)

*Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*
Timothy O. Benson
UMI Research Press; 280 pp.; $44.95 (cloth)

*Dada/Dimensions*
Stephen C. Foster, ed.
UMI Research Press; 292 pp.; $34.95 (cloth)

Germany's modernist artists sharpened the critical edge of their work during the transition from Wilhelmine repression to Weimar anxiety, increasingly making formal concerns serve political engagement. Each of these books addresses a segment of that progression; and together they suggest the roots of today's socially-conscious German culture.

In the best of these studies, Peter Jelavich elegantly justifies Thomas Mann's claim that German theatre is not just "a form of convivial amusement, but an educational experience" as he combines a critique of Munich's pre-World War I aesthetic innovations with a chronicle of the surrounding turmoil. He demonstrates how Munich's modernist theatre became both a refuge from official society and a forum in which to attack its repression. Jelavich replaces the dry hermeticism of much theatre history with a method that searches for a political event to explain a playwright's linguistic choice; his method diagnoses the religious pressure which necessitated a director's ingenious mise-en-scène; and suggests the economic strategy which motivated a company's performance style. The chapters on Wedekind stand out. By concentrating on his use of language, Jelavich is able to discuss the major modernist battles against neoclassicism, censorship, and the Catholic church.

Jelavich also provides a history lesson for today's avant-garde. His section
on the “retheatricalization of theatre” recalls some beginnings of our contemporary subordination of the written text to the visual score; and he shows how this seemingly apolitical form can easily become an ideological tool. After analyzing Reinhardt’s and Kandinsky’s theatre, Jelavich reveals similar aesthetics underpinning Georg Fuchs’s celebrations of a racially-pure Volk. Jelavich also cites Fuchs to dispel the myth that modernism originated only on the left. By the final pre-war years, Munich’s modernist community would have polarized into left and right, each moving modernism past self-examination to attacks on all social structures.

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In Literary Life in German Expressionism and the Berlin Circles Roy Allen chronicles what was happening simultaneously in Berlin; however, his study is merely informative, not illuminating. He has written a straight history of the period—reporting who knew whom; what they did; where they were—but leaves it to some future critic to draw the conclusions from his research. His reluctance to intervene in the history makes this a disappointingly impersonal book.

Allen focuses on the editors and publishers active in Berlin between 1910 and 1920. Herwarth Walden, Franz Pfemfert, Paul Cassirer, as well as members of Der Neue Club and Neue Jugend all receive brief portraits as Allen depicts their separate attempts to “increase the psychic temperature” of their readers. But Allen seems less interested in explicating Expressionist literature than in describing the life its writers and editors led. His study gives a straightforward picture of the vibrant atmosphere of the cafes—no one, it seems, ever stopped talking; “they were our school... our Parliament,” said one writer—and he notes the decade’s proliferation of journals, books, readings, and exhibitions to show how effectively the Expressionists translated those discussions into productive activity.

The real story here—the basis for the book Allen didn’t write—is the link between the Expressionists’ literary ideas and their gradual politicization. Allen missed his chance to fully analyze the roots of the Expressionists’ pro-war sentiments in their pre-war celebration of Nietzsche’s Dionysian and Apollonian vitality: their desire for dynamic life led them to embrace the most life-destructive of forces. Later, as the war ravaged their communities, their belated pacifism forced them to renounce many Expressionist ideas and to end the movement. One can find the bitter commentary on this progression, which Allen all too briefly attempts, only by turning to the Dadaists.

Dada is famous as a recklessly nihilist movement, but the two UMI books reveal a greater philosophical sophistication behind its pranks. Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader in Berlin, as well as several artists outside Germany, advocated a constructive use of Dada, gathering the debris of mass media to build images rather than to simulate their decay. Setting
themselves against the egoism they perceived in Expressionism, many Dadaists—Hausmann especially—searched for mechanical ways to construct experience, hoping to find clues to self-knowledge in the automatism that surrounded them. Jane Hancock, in *Dada/Dimensions*, is particularly skillful at demonstrating the affirmative spirituality in Arp’s chance-generated collage. Arp embraced chance, she shows, not to represent life’s absurdity, but to discover a more organic order.

Timothy Benson’s book—like Allen’s, a revised doctoral thesis—is a useful introduction to Hausmann’s long-overlooked work, but too often it betrays its academic origin. There is something funny about a scholarly study of Dada that lacks even the slightest hint of play. Slightly better, because more varied, is Stephen Foster’s anthology. The twelve essays are of uneven quality, but each reports important information and helps demythologize a movement whose implications are still being felt in art, literature, and performance.