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Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines

By Iori Cole. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2018. xiv + 240 pp., appendix, notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$24.47 (PB). ISBN 978-0-2710-8092-5.

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Reviews

Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines. By LORI COLE. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2018. xiv + 240 pp., appendix, notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$24.47 (PB). ISBN 978-0-2710-8092-5.

While the study of the so-called “little magazines” of modernism at large has grown, in the past few years, into a coherent field with a rich scholarship, it would still benefit from further articulation of possible conventions and standards. The recent multivolume work edited by Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop (2009–2017), entitled *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, is perhaps the widest, most complete collection available in this particular area of study. As comprehensive as this project is, it is still limited to the European-North American geographical circuit as well as by a time frame that reaches the Second World War, excluding the explosion of avant-garde activity of the transitional period between modern and contemporary art (i.e. the postwar era up to the late 1960s). Lori Cole’s contribution (reviewed here) expands the geography of the field by relational means, exploring the connections between the Americas and Europe in the form of transatlantic magazines from the first postwar period. In them, beyond the strident proclamations of manifestos and the fundamental questioning of institutions such as art and literature, there is a profound reflection about the redefinition of national and international characters and boundaries in the aftermath of the First World War. Cole traces this parallel construction not by contrasting the future to the past, as the manifesto form usually directs, but by contrasting the present with both the past and the future. She does this by focusing on the questionnaire, a form amply reproduced by visual and literary avant-gardes as well as the art-world, whose origin – at least in terms of use and format – the author argues is to be found in nineteenth-century French periodicals. Questionnaires give, in this sense, an alternate account of modernist discourse-building, one that is almost inherently diffuse and differential when it comes to the construction of a network or community, unlike the unitary character of the manifesto, which gives clear shape and direction to the relationships of those involved.

Divided into six chapters, the book offers a compelling account of how the questionnaire de-stabilizes not only the self-narratives of modernist movements and avant-gardes, but also the national perspective common to their study. The despair of intellectuals and artists regarding the future of Europe and “European culture” after World War I is well-known, variously expressed by currents such as neoclassicism in music or the return of figuration in once-radical painters like Picasso. Cole richly exposes how this intellectual climate was directly articulated by the participants of magazine surveys, but most importantly, what this very same climate produced in terms of dialogue between Europe and the Americas. Cole links the national dimension of political and social contexts with international contacts between the continents, whether through war (like the US-Spanish war that permeated Cuban nationalism and its subsequent print culture all the way through the 1920s) or through other events such as two-sided waves of migration during and after World War I. Thus, to the pessimism of Europeans about their loss of geopolitical importance, directly attached to perspectives on

cultural (even moral) importance, corresponds a certain optimism on the part of Americans at large, whether in Latin American or US nationalist affirmations of newfound relevance in the international arena.

However, Cole wields terms like “America,” “Latin America,” and “Europe” without providing necessary contextualization and clarification of their meaning. Issues of definition of these concepts transcend any single book, but a deeper reflection upon them would have helped avoid the various points of confusion that remain across the text when it comes to their use. The most glaring example is the author’s suggestion that the Cuban magazine’s – *Revista de Avance* – questionnaire regarding “our America” refers exclusively to Latin America. Insufficiently supported, this simplification eludes the linguistic complexity that informs the geographical traditions of English, Spanish, and French, which conceive of continental masses differently. Not enough evidence is provided that *Revista de Avance* means “Latin America” when referring to “America,” and at some point the source contradicts this position; what emerges is the clear tensions between linguistic referents that eminently destabilize common-sense definitions and uses of these geographical concepts. In a way, the same reading that focuses on the differences and fragmentations *within* modernist conceptions and definitions is unfortunately not extended to their geographical implications: why would, for example, the respondents in *Revista de Avance* not simply use “Latin America” when referring to it? This is, perhaps, a problem that extends all the way into the conception of modernity itself, encoded as it is in European philosophies of history that try to obscure the very diversity of “Europe” as such, both in geographical and in historical terms. This leads to the problem of generalizing the English-language conception of two Americas without offering a contrast with the Spanish-language conception of a single America, and to the regular, also confusing, use of “Latin America” and “South America” as interchangeable terms. The questionnaire as the center of this kind of discussion and encounter between altogether distinct conceptions of the world could be a rich source for future research.

Presented as an important counterpart of the manifesto, the questionnaire plays a rhetorical, predominantly discursive role in the book. It is fundamental, for scholars in this area, to attend Cole’s call to consider other formats and other sorts of texts in the collective self-construction of modernism and the avant-garde movements that took it to its last consequences. Still, the questionnaire as such also seems to play another role that Cole hints at but does not meaningfully explore. In contextualizing the format, she recalls both the nineteenth-century French periodical tradition but also the emergence of the social sciences as crucial to its understanding. In privileging the rhetorical, and therefore the periodical/journalistic character of the questionnaire, its scientific aspect is interpreted under the lens of an ironic appropriation common to avant-garde practices. In doing so, the author misses the opportunity to delve deeper into the epistemological function of questionnaires, and their use not as rhetorical or ironic device but as true tools of inquiry. Many an avant-garde, and even various modernist movements already in the nineteenth century (whether Realism or Symbolism), followed Enlightenment philosophy (and Romanticism with it) in conceiving of esthetics as a field of knowledge, not only a field of discourse and expression. The procedures of the questionnaire, as shown by Cole, share an epistemological preoccupation that transcends the artistic milieu; the background of rational inquiry attacked by avant-gardes and modernism pose questions that attempt to link art and society more directly. Knowledge, as often suggested by these movements, was more than just a rational enterprise, and its critique was a feature of the esthetics of modernists and their more extreme colleagues in the avant-gardes at large. The questionnaire thus plays a potentially non-ironic role in the definition of avant-garde collectivities, involving ways of knowing embedded in esthetic categories. Nevertheless, more work in this area can be undertaken by other scholars, having Cole’s book as a solid departure point.

In conclusion, *Surveying the Avant-Garde* is an important contribution to the literature on “little magazines” and the modernists and avant-gardes that produced them, particularly for its focus both on an integral aspect of their discourses scarcely studied – the questionnaire –

and the international, networked nature of their development. This global approach to the various cultural movements of the first half of the twentieth century is necessary to understand their aims; most, if not all, intended to reflect upon their position as potential authors of great revolutions in art and literature that would not be limited by national borders. The internationalism of the avant-gardes (even the purportedly nationalist ones) remains an important object of further study, in the sense that, as Cole aptly shows, every nationalism depends on the conceptualization of an *other* that affirms the uniqueness of a country's tradition or position within an increasingly globalized world. Terms like "Latin America," "America," and "Europe" lose their categorical unity even as cultural movements attempt to lay claim to their definition – "modernity" is therefore also destabilized as a particular historical period whose characteristics strictly belong to one region or another. Instead, their construction is shown to be nonlinear, and perhaps most importantly, as relational, between contexts and actors who stake their own claims upon historical processes and their geographical associations. In short, Cole's book is essential to any bibliography about the avant-garde in general.

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