Finding the "International Word": Artists of the Historical Avant-Garde and Uniting Interwar Europe

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INTRODUCTION

"An international word. Just a word, and the word a movement. Very easy to understand. Quite terribly simple." -Hugo Ball[1]

In 1916 Zürich, German poet Hugo Ball opened the doors to a new club—a fantastical escape from the Great War, bourgeois monotony, the inhumanity of modern politics. The Cabaret Voltaire, as he called it, had one function: "guest artists will come and give musical performances and readings at the daily meetings. The young artists of Zürich, whatever their orientation, are invited to come along with suggestions and contributions of all kinds."[2] Ball's new club, nestled in the center of Europe, aimed to become a beacon of acceptance, innovation, and international collaboration. Ball described his Cabaret in his memoir as a "playground for crazy emotions," or a place where artists could develop their skills, openly critique current politics and the war, and enjoy an evening of stimulating entertainment. Yet, the power this tiny backroom had to bring together artists from all over Europe—people with the same desire to escape the political chaos and appreciate the innovations in modern art from different parts of the world—was nothing short of incredible. In its 6-month existence, Hugo Ball's experimental nightclub managed to attract the attention of Filippo Marinetti, Paul Klee, Tristan Tzara, Wassily Kandinsky, Claude Debussy, Max Reinhardt, Pablo Picasso, and Max Ernst, all of whom would influence profound developments in the modern arts. Furthermore, only one day a week (Sunday) was dedicated to highlighting Swiss works of art, which Ball implied was the least inspiring day. Every other day, artists would share Eastern European poetry, German paintings, American Jazz, French dances and music, Italian sculptures,

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[1] Ball, Hugo. "Dada manifesto (1916)." Republished by Sterling, Bruce. "Hugo Ball's Dada Manifesto, July 1916." *WIRED Magazine.* 14 July 2016. https://www.wired.com/beyond-the-beyond/2016/07/hugo-balls-dada-manifesto-july-2016/

[2] Ball, Hugo. *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). 50. https://archive.org/details/flightoutoftimed00ball/mode/2up EPUB.

Japanese theatre, Turkish art, and more, sometimes dedicating certain evenings to their regions of origin.[3] Like Switzerland itself at the time, Hugo Ball had established a "neutral space," a place where everyone—active participants and spectators alike—could imagine a world where art eliminated social divisions. Everyone could exist in this almost utopic community centered around art.

The same year of the Cabaret Voltaire, Hugo Ball ascended the stage and read aloud his "Dada Manifesto," a short essay that would become the catalyst for a revolutionary historical art movement. In it, Ball envisioned a new solution to every problem he witnessed during the turn of the century and the Great War in the form of Dada. An art style with a distinct penchant for chaos, mysticism, and impulse, Dada became Ball's way to bring back creativity and joy to life. More specifically, by embracing the nonsensical in art— "sound poetry," or the deconstruction of poetry to guttural noises and erratic rhythms, was Ball's proud invention, according to his memoir—people can find sincerity in the world around them and find connection to each other again. He wrote in his manifesto,

> "How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. […] How can one get rid of everything that smack of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, […] europeanized, enervated? By saying dada. Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop. … . I don't want words that other people have invented. All the words are other people's inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm..."[4]

With his nonsensical language, fixation on the sound and form of words rather than the content, and declaration to annihilate the "smack of journalism," or the common language devoid of any personal meaning, Ball imagined a world where one word means something to everyone, regardless of the harmony of definitions. The individuality of the artist could finally be celebrated in a world where the constructs of borders no longer existed.

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[3] Ball, Hugo. *Flight Out of Time.* 51-55.
[4] Ball, Hugo. "Dada manifesto (1916)."

The story of Hugo Ball, the Dada Manifesto, and the Cabaret Voltaire still existed within the greater story of World War I. At the same time Ball enthusiastically welcomed all kinds of artists and critics, Europe itself seemed to be in complete disarray. Sigmund Freud retrospectively concluded in 1929 that the Great War had genuinely exposed the heinous nature of humankind, and that any semblance of "civilization" Europeans had prior to the war had been destroyed. "The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow," Freud wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, "is that men are not gentle creatures […]; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness."[5] His observations reflected the immediate consequences of the Great War he witnessed. In the year 1929 alone, Mussolini tightened control on Fascist Italy with his indoctrination of fascism as a political religion; the Great Depression struck the world but put immense economic and political pressure on Germany, still struggling to pay off the war debt while attempting to rebuild. Furthermore, the Weimar Republic began to crumble, as foreign investors pulled out of Germany and people within the republican government began to subscribe more to Nazism. In the East, Stalin took full control over the Soviet colonies and banned indigenization policies that allowed for the proliferation of important national culture, instituting pogroms in Ukraine to kill artists and the intelligentsia. He exiled Leon Trotsky and officially began collectivization and "dekulakization," or the murder of the rural bourgeois.[6] Both communism and fascism were becoming the violent "solutions" to the turmoil of post-war Europe.

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[5] Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents,* trans. James Strachey (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 94-95.

[6] Shearer, David. "Stalin at War, 1918-1953: Patterns of Violence and Foreign Threat," J*ahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 66, no. 2 (2018): 196. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44968765

Even in the Dada movement itself, artists could not excuse life from the reality of war. As French writer and Dada-surrealist Julien Gracq wrote:

> "The Dada movement, born in the year when the world war showed its first symptoms of complete decomposition, was the most determined and direct outcome of destruction and sacking that literature had known […] All the founders […] were marked by the sacramental signs of their own suicide."[7]

Gracq stated that death and destruction were at the center of life in Europe. Echoing Freud's theory that civilization ends in its own destruction, Gracq and other Dadaists saw suicide as both a symptom and a natural response to the war. The war, as Jacques Vaché, a World War I soldier and inspiration for the Dada-surrealist movement, expressed, had pushed Europeans to believe that self-implosion was the only solution to all the distress that surrounded them. "How will I do it," Vaché wrote in his last letter to André Breton in 1918, "to get through these last months in uniform? (They told me the war was over.) I was at the end of my tether, and still THEY lied…"[8] Vaché's own tragic suicide a year later captured the general sentiment of most Europeans at the end of the war: governments could not be trusted, life had become a disappointing lie, and death seemed to be the only solution to the world's misery.

Looking at geopolitical history during the time of the Great War and Dada, Scholar Mark Mazower explained the rise of national self-determination, a Versailles Treaty concept that determined political sovereignty based on national identity, gave rise to the ideas of national purity, the "heart of interwar European politics." Now that Europeans knew they were capable of mass destruction, the combined efforts of increased militarization and increased nationalism based on the myth of a 'common enemy' allowed European nation-states to harden political

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[7] Gracq, Julien. "Le surrealisme et la litterature contemporaine," in *Oeuvres completes*, ed. Bernhild Boie, (Paris: La Pléiade, 1989), 1012. A translated version can be found here: Becker, Annette. "The Avant-Garde, Madness and the Great War." *Journal of Contemporary History 35,* no. 1 (January 2000): 74. https://www.jstor.org/stable/261182

[8] Vaché, Jacques. "À Monsieur André Breton, 14-11-18." *Lettres de guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018). A translated version can be found here: Becker. "The Avant-Garde, Madness and the Great War." 75.

borders and polarize identities, often in increasingly genocidal ways. As Mazower wrote, "[In] inter-war Europe, neither minority nor majority believed in assimilation; the new democracies tended to be exclusionary and antagonistic in their ethnic relations."[9] Switzerland—which allowed everyone from Soviet expatriates to German pacifists, to French critics, Italian proto-fascists, American émigrés to share the same community and express their diverse perspectives almost freely—appeared as an anomaly. How could cultural production heavily dependent on international collaboration and aspirations to create a borderless Europe exist during a moment of political extremism?

However, when we look at the world around Hugo Ball and the Dada movement, we can see that European society and culture was anything but broken beyond repair. Namely, Hugo Ball, visitors of his Cabaret Voltaire, and others were members of the larger historical avant-garde, a period of art history defined by scholar Peter Bürger's seminal theory as a radical break from well-established conventions in art and aesthetics in order explore art's mystical and transformative effects on the individual artist. The historical avant-garde had one, primary goal: to fuse art and life to change life for the better, often by rethinking and experimenting with the forms, composition, and materials of art in innovative ways.[10] Prior to this moment in art and cultural history, art had become an institution—a separate sphere of bourgeois life that completely depersonalized art and lost its vital functions in society—and these artists accepted the mission to recenter life around and 'egalitarian' and 'international' art.

Furthermore, an American art critic Clement Greenberg, who also gave the first definition of the historical avant-garde in 1939, defined it as a "superior consciousness of

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[9] Mazower, Mark. *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2000): 52-55. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=6069042

[10] Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 15-34.

history," arguing that bourgeois social order was no longer the "eternal" status quo but rather "the latest term in a succession of social orders."[11] The 'equal, international' society where art had a precise function artists imagined, according to Bürger and Greenburg, intended to reject capitalism, remaining critical of the politics and culture that capitalism bred.

Bürger's and Greenberg's theories of the avant-garde are useful to comprehend this period of European cultural history as a revolutionary historical event, not as a style of art, and they both recognized the central unity experienced by avant-garde artists across the continent at the time. Their theories help us to understand a whole community of people in Europe and abroad who actively sought to defy political aims to polarize society. However, to define the internationalism promoted by artists at the time in Marxist-Leninist terms failed to understand the whole picture. Namely, by equating this intellectual rejection of "bourgeois culture"—more accurately, *Western* bourgeois culture—both critics both isolated the avant-garde in Eastern Europe into "Russian Backwardness," or the assimilation of Easter European nation-states under "Russia" due to a Russian-led bastardization of pan-Slavism as a reaction to Western tendencies for nationalism.[12] Eastern Europeans were thought to have "preserved" themselves in an atemporal fantasy immune to liberalism, democracy, and in most cases, modernism, especially since Russia itself was late (compared to its Western counterparts) to industrialization and modernization of the urban landscape. Thus, this stark contrast of realities only generated

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[11] Greenberg, Clement. "The Avant-garde and Kitsch," 1939, In *The American Intellectual Tradition: 1865 to the Present,* ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 271-273.

[12] I say "bastardization" because the Bolsheviks had no interest in considering all Slavic people to be "equals" in the Soviet Union. Pan-Slavism had its origins in Constantinople, as well as the greater Balkan region of Europe, as an attempt to resist against Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian imperial attempts for assimilation and celebrate Slavic cultural and religious practices often erased by an increasingly secularized Europe. Made to appear "noble" and "necessary" against the imperial forces of the West, Russians co-opted pan-Slavism and racialized it in their attempt to conquer, and later Sovietize, the East, placing Russians at the top of the hierarchy, and other Slavic people below them. Saunders, David. *Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform, 1801-1882* (London: Routledge, 2014). 282. https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.4324/9781315837000

competition between the two sides of the European continent, leading Western Europeans to believe they were "more advanced" than their Russian counterparts.[13] Both critics attempt to reconcile the "different path" to avant-gardism by attempting to showcase the Soviet consensus that art had to have a function in society, yet this "othering" of the East both minimized the contributions non-Russian artists made to the development of the avant-garde and contradicted the original aims of the movement.

Hugo Ball evidently was not the only artist who wanted to create a space where every idea and every person was welcome. In fact, artists all over Europe were creating spaces—exhibitions, galleries, theater and film festivals—that celebrated diversity of perspective and international collaboration. We can see multiple prime examples of avant-garde artists reaching out and actively looking to movements outside their own nations to search for "an international word," or an artistic language all of Europe could understand and develop together.

The Historical Avant-Garde: An International Project

In this thesis, I argue that looking at the interactions and cultural exchange among avant-garde artists throughout Europe offers a profound counter-narrative to the idea of a "polarized Europe." More precisely, by understanding that the avant-garde artists of the interwar period held a high regard for internationalism—of using art and, more importantly, artistic collaboration with artists across the continent to create a new, egalitarian society without political divides—we can see that the avant-garde had become the glue for Europe's cultural survival. Furthermore, it was this international collaboration, this involvement not only of the West but especially of the

[13] Snyder, Jack. "Russian Backwardness and the Future of Europe." *Daedalus* 123, no. 2 (1994): 184. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027242.

East, that carried much of the avant-garde tradition throughout the interwar period, and it was the synthesis of Eastern and Western modern art circles that inspired innovation.

In the first chapter, I discuss the international origins of the avant-garde and how it continued to evolve as an international project. Namely, I take a broader look at the avant-garde era, beginning in the late 1800s with French playwright and essayist Alfred Jarry, and provide a history of its founding 'fathers' and their successors in different parts of Europe. After Jarry, comes Filippo Marinetti, an Italian poet and playwright who, after moving to Paris to join Jarry's inner circle, founded the futurist movement, inspiring followers in France, Italy, and Ukraine to build upon his ideas. Afterward, I elaborate upon Burliuk's Ukrainian neo-primitivism, which revolutionized the fine arts and also achieved international recognition.

In chapter 2, I delve into a specific case of Ukrainian and French collaboration: The Berezil Theater in Paris, which bore many similarities to French experimental theatre. More precisely, I take a closer look at the similarities between two playwrights, Les Kurbas from Kyiv and Antonin Artaud from Paris, to argue that Antonin Artaud's vision of theatre was heavily inspired by the work of Kurbas' Berezil Theatre, which aimed to embody a 'new' kind of actor. I examine the history of the Berezil Theatre, as well as its principles, to explain how its ideas travelled from Ukraine to France, and how Kurbas' work can be seen in Artaud's.

My third chapter will be dedicated to the French fascination with Diaghilev's *Ballet russes*, which featured some of the most important ballet dancers and choreographers of the 20th Century and encouraged artistic collaboration with renowned artists like Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse.[14] The *Ballet russes*, founded by Russian Sergei Diaghilev, toured in

[14] Debussy, Claude. *Music for L'Après-Midi d'un Faune,* with choreographic notes by Bronislava Nijinska. 1912. Notated musical score, Bronislava Nijinska Collection. Library of Congress, Music Division. https://www.loc.gov/resource/ihas.200181882.0

Paris, hiring mostly expatriates from Soviet colonies as principal dancers and choreographers, and their diverse backgrounds further challenged Soviet hegemony and national identity.[15] Here, I will argue that, because of the *Ballet russes,* Paris was no longer considered a site of national cultural dominance but now an international laboratory for all artists to work in.

Why France and Ukraine?

Eastern European artists had engaged with their Western counterparts since the beginning of the historical avant-garde, demonstrating their concurrent, not independent, paths toward modernism. Ukraine, for example, experienced a cultural renaissance at the precise time Hugo Ball declared the Dada revolution. Contrary to Soviet mythology and scholarship, Ukraine, throughout most of the peak of the European avant-garde movement, already had a legacy of well-established institutions like the Academy of Arts prior to the violent Soviet invasion in 1918. Then, the Ukrainianization cultural policy enforced by the Soviet Russian government to establish a Bolshevik Republic allied with the Soviet Union allowed for the language, schools, books, and more to be produced in the native language of Ukrainian. This 1923 law came after years of cultural suppression and censorship in the hands of the Russians, so the "explosion" of avant-garde art—the explorations into cubism, abstraction, and art nouveau we see in the works of artists in this period—is regarded as a cultural rebellion to the conventions of the past, as well as Russian authority. Ukraine had the chance to become culturally independent and took it, opening their doors to France, Germany, and the rest of the West for innovative collaboration.[16]

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[15] Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballet russes,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), vii. http://archive.org/details/diaghilevsballet1989gara

[16] Skhandrij, Myroslav. *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910-1930: Contested Memory* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 25-38. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781618119766

This thesis focuses on the strong partnership of unlikely contemporaries, so I chose the relationship between France and Ukraine to highlight how differences of geography and Western perceptions of an isolated "Russia" did not matter to avant-garde artists of the interwar period. Their distance, in both the political worlds they lived in as well as geography, made no difference to the development of their styles and theories for their artistic revolutions. As one scholar noted, the Kyvian cultural revolution bore a striking resemblance to their Western counterparts, demonstrating that these Ukrainian artists operated on a much more international scale and were much more integrated into the European artistic tradition than previously thought.[17] The cultural connection between France and Ukraine, furthermore, preceded the peak of the avant-garde era, beginning in 1908 where renowned artists like Alexandra Exter, Vadym Meller, Mykhailo Boichuk, and others established the *cercle des Ukrainiens à Paris,* a study group in the Latin Quarter dedicated to bringing Ukrainian artistic thought to Parisian art.[18]

It is useful to introduce Ukraine into this discussion of the importance of the avant-garde because the proliferation of Ukrainian art both challenges preconceptions of the avant-garde as a strictly Western bourgeois consequence and unifies Ukraine to the greater European continent. The political narrative that Ukraine's art and culture in the 1920s belonged to this Soviet-controlled history that exists separately from the world of "high art" cannot persist with recent scholarship heavily involved in the Ukrainian avant-garde movement. The exploration of this moment in history with a focus on the artists' direct collaboration with other Europeans demonstrates that the interwar avant-garde movement was neither Western nor Eastern, but European.

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[17] Skhandrij. *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine*, xii.
[18] *Ibid.,* 4.

I: The International Origins of the Avant-Garde

"Our thinking is […] the attempt to turn away from the old… conception of the world and to create an attitude of universality—clarity—reality." -El Lissitsky, Ilya Ehrenburg[19]

Internationalism—the idea of a universal, modern art that resonates with every artist, regardless of national, ethnic, or political identity—was at the heart of the historical avant-garde. Without this central idea, the general project to reconstruct life around art could not have come to fruition. However, ideas about internationalism could not have manifested in the historical avant-garde if the artists themselves did not actively engage with their counterparts across the continent and, in some cases, the world. As one scholar noted, the historical avant-garde must be regarded as a "rhizomatic network" of migratory artists all over the continent, with central hubs dispersed in major cities like Paris, Moscow, and Berlin.[20] Furthermore, in the physical relocation of artists throughout Europe, the art styles themselves underwent a process of intellectual exchange that allowed artists to explore the mission to achieve an international language through various, experimental forms.[21]

In this chapter, I argue that an essential aspect of the historical avant-garde is the fact that it emerged simultaneously throughout Europe, and that its development throughout the 20th Century depended on the relocation, direct communication, or exchange of literary material among pioneer other artists across the continent. I focus on three early avant-gardists, each originating from a different city in Europe—Alfred Jarry and the *fin de siècle,* Filippo Marinetti and futurism, and David Burliuk and neo-primitivism—to demonstrate how they began building

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[19] Lissitsky, El and Ilya Ehrenburg. "*Veshch* Statement (1922)." In *Art and Theory, 1900 to 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwood Publishing, 2003). 345.
[20] Hagener, Malte. "Reframing the Historical Avant-Garde – Media, Historiography and Method." In *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007): 19-20. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt46mw4m.5
[21] Bojtár, Endre. "The Avant-Garde in Central and Eastern European Literature." *Art Journal* 49, no. 1 (1990): 56-62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/777181

the "rhizomatic network" of artists prior to the peak of the historical avant-garde, and how notions of internationalism wove their ways into the most prominent movements of the time.

Paris, 1893: Alfred Jarry (1873-1907)

This 'beginning' of the avant-garde movement finds itself at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris, 1893, where French playwright Alfred Jarry performed his most famous play, *Ubu Roi*, for the first and only time. Jarry electrified the stage and European conceptions about the possibility and purpose of theatre, so much so that his schoolboy humor, terrible puns, and outlandish costumes and visual décor not only shocked the bourgeois audience but offended them deeply, causing a "full-scale riot" in the auditorium.[22] W.B. Yeats, who happened to be in the audience that night, called *Ubu Roi* a "rough beast" that "slouches towards Bethlehem to be born," and he predicted that Jarry would be the end of the era of the Late Romantics and beginning of modernity, whose form would worship a "Savage God."[23]

Jarry's *Ubu Roi,* a semi-adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* intended to break every rule about theatre. It had neither a fixed setting nor an established time period, undermining 19th-Century tropes about historical or domestic backgrounds to ground the characters. Each character was directed to speak with a different accent; Père Ubu, for instance, had a unique, nonsensical speech pattern, full of swears, malapropisms, gibberish, foul jokes, and primordial grunts. *Ubu Roi* has no psychology, opposing the realist aesthetic of the 19th Century that strove for comprehension and justified motivations. Père Ubu was a purposefully over-exaggerated caricature governed only by his insatiable greed and over-the-top irreverence for everything; he

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[22] Ford, "The King of Charisma." *New York Review of Books,* 2012. Pp. 63 https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/05/10/alfred-jarry-king-charisma/

[23] Yeats, W.B. "The Trembling of the Veil, Book IV: The Tragic Generation," in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Autobiographies III,* ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York, Scribner 1999). 265-266. https://archive.org/details/autobiographies00yeat/mode/2up

rose to power as king of his land only because he fed the royal courts buckets of his own feces, starting a food fight that encouraged the actors to fling 'feces' (a prop, of course) into the crowd.

All this affinity for shock in *Ubu Roi*, as well as its subsequent negative reactions from the audience on opening night, came to Jarry's absolute delight. He revealed in an 1896 personal essay, "The theatre has not yet won the freedom to eject forcibly any member of the audience who doesn't understand, or to comb out the potential hecklers and hooligans from the auditorium during each interval." He criticized public theatre for its acquiescence to public demands and preferences, as well as the demand to follow a time-old plot structure based on "universally known fables which, anyway, were explained over and over again" and were often hinted excessively through motifs already established in the prologue. "An original work will, at least on the first night," he wrote, "be greeted by a public that remains bemused and, consequently, dumb."[24]

Though the artists of 19th Century could not see what Jarry wished to achieve, the artists of the 20th Century, especially in eccentric art circles, *loved* his work. Two French playwrights, Antonin Artaud and Paul Vitrac, for instance, founded a theatre company in Jarry's name, even incorporating the poet's (anti-)philosophy into the mission statement.[25] The company was unsuccessful—it only ran for four seasons between the years 1926-1929—yet it remains one of the strongest links to Jarry's legacy in avant-garde French theatre.

Outside of France, important actors in the development of the avant-garde caught work of the French playwright and began to produce works in his honor. Filippo Marinetti moved to Paris

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[24] Jarry, Alfred. "Of the Futility of the "Theatrical" in the Theater," in *European Theatre Performance Practice, 1900 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2016): 195. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315255842-23

[25] Artaud, Antonin and Roger Vitrac. *Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry et l'hostilité publique.* Booklet, 1-11, s.n., 1930. Robert J. and Linda Klieger Stillman Pataphysics Collection on the Gordon N. Ray Fund, PML 197100. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

from Italy in 1893, the same year Jarry produced *Ubu Roi*, with the intention to join his intimate literary circle.[26] Marinetti's direct engagement with Alfred Jarry in the late 1800s introduced him to the world of theatre and the key concepts of divorcing arts from life that would later inspire his futurist works, changing the course of his career forever.[27]

Marinetti's 1909 *Le Roi Bombance*—his first play and digression from previous works of poetry—was an Italian reimagining of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and he even put on his own production for the first time in the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.[28] As the 1909 subtitle suggested, this play was a "satirical tragedy" of the Italian Revolution and the political Left. The "sacred" kitchen boys Tourte, Syphon, and Béchamel are fated to prepare a huge feast to satisfy the growing restless population of the "Affamés," or the hungry peasants of the vaguely medieval kingdom of Cockagine. Throughout the first three acts, the three kitchen boys attempt to take over the kitchen after the original Head Chef committed suicide for failing to deliver a fish to the king. They fail, however, to deliver such a grand feast, and they are then cannibalized and ripped into shreds by the crowd, who were unable to be controlled by the gluttonous king, who also falls victim to them after also starving to death.[29]

Roi Bombance was more direct in its critique of governments and political reformers than Jarry was in *Ubu Roi*. Moreover, Jarry leaned more into the aesthetics of the absurd than his Italian counterpart. However, the savagery of the characters, the profane language, and even the audience's reception at the time, show how Alfred Jarry's theatrical visions opened the door for

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[26] Bowler, Anne. "Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism." *Theory and Society* 20, no.6 (1991): 767. https://www.jstor.org/stable/657603

[27] Somigli, Luca. "The Poet and the Vampire: 'Roi Bombance' and the Crisis of Symbolist Values." *Italica* 91, no. 4 (2014): 574. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24368516.

[28] Bowler, "Politics as Art," 767.

[29] Marinetti, Filippo. *Le Roi Bombance,* originally published 1905. (University of Michigan Press, 2008). https://archive.org/details/leroibombancetr00marigoog/page/n3/mode/2up

Marinetti to develop his own sense of black humor and futurist aesthetic. A 1909 *L'Action Française* article recognized Jarry's influence on Marinetti, drawing the following parallels:

> "…[The] shadow of Alfred Jarry was able to be stirred, and his *Ubu Roi* lives again in *Roi Bombance*. And likewise, the room yesterday was quite reminiscent of the room in the Nouveau-Théâtre, […] where Jarry's fantasy was performed for the first time."[30]

In a 1909 op-ed in *L'Intransigeant*, Marinetti reflected on the audience's reaction to his play, where he expressed his own shock that his play had provoked a riot in the theatre, and that people had misconceived it as either a complete rupture of art or a part of a grander political agenda for anarchy. He wrote, "*Le Roi Bombance* is not an agenda; it is, I repeat, a play of youth that does not place me far away from tradition."[31] While he did not mention Jarry directly in his list of inspirations—he reserved this space for Aeschylus, most associated with classical tragedy, and Rabelais, the French father of satire—he implicated that his position in the history of theatre was still very much linked to his immediate predecessors.

In Eastern Europe, undercurrents of Jarry's seminal play and proposal for absurdist theatre manifested themselves in major productions. One of the first avant-garde plays ever performed in Kyiv was a 1924 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* directed and produced by director Les Kurbas. The set, an austere black wall and ground with several screens with painted letters on them, was designed by Vadym Meller—a close collaborator with Kurbas' theatre production studio—and took the audience to a world outside space and time. The lighting design was playful and dramatic, matching the purposefully disjointed rhythm of the play's movement

[30] Translated by author. Original quotation in French can be found here: Clayeures, "Les théâtres : Le Roi Bombance," *L'Action Française,* April 3, 1909. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k756496w

[31] Translated by author. Original quotation in French can be found here: Marinetti, "Les funéralities du Roi Bombance." *L'Intransigeant : Journal de Paris,* April 12, 1909. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k785194n

and dialogue. Most importantly, when rethinking the original script to apply to a modern Kyiv, Kurbas made one, crucial artistic decision: to make the Fool, not Macbeth, the central figure.

By focusing on the Fool, Kurbas shifted the original message of *Macbeth* to emphasize the lust for power, insatiable greed, and inherent violence of despotic authority—using motifs of absurdity and 'assaults' on language that defined Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. The Fool "linked the acts together, broke down the tension of the play, ridiculed and satirized everything. Untouched by all, only he survived the madness, violence, the moral wasteland."[32] He symbolized fantasy, irony, ridicule, and disillusion with the new power regime—Kurbas' own reaction to the Soviet invasion of Ukraine and incessant propaganda about the myth of the Revolution. Furthermore, by creating a version of *Macbeth* that had no faith in the change of power, Kurbas, like Jarry and Marinetti, used the theatre space to desecrate the institutions that surrounded him. For, in the 1924 Soviet Republic of Ukraine (Stalin's rise to power), when Ukrainization was already being stamped out by Soviet authorities, and when promises of national independence were fading quickly, the Ukrainian director only had the theatre to truly critique everything he could.

Thus, the legacy of *Ubu Roi*, whether directly adapted or merely used as a key to a new world of theatrical storytelling, appeared in European theatre in strikingly similar ways. Alfred Jarry had become a universal symbol for revolution, for creating a new world devoid of hypocrisy, greed, and violence from the oppressor.

Milan, 1909: Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944)

In the same year as *Roi Bombance* debuted in Paris, Filippo Marinetti embarked on a new artistic movement, divorcing himself from the Symbolist ideas of the *fin de siècle:* Futurism. The

[32] Makaryk, Irena. *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004): 81-111. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442679887-007

history of the futurist movement began with his "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" in 1909. The core theme of Marinetti's new art style was violence: "We will glorify war," he wrote, "the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women." Read like a war declaration, Marinetti set the futurists against the decrepit yet revered conventions of current society. "An immense pride was buoying us up because we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet, like proud beacons or forward sentries against an army of hostile stars glaring down at us from their celestial encampments," wrote the playwright.

> "Suddenly we jumped, hearing the mighty noise of the huge double-decker trams that rumbled by outside, ablaze with colored lights, like villages on holiday suddenly struck and uprooted…Then the silence deepened. But, as we listened to the old canal muttering its feeble prayers and the creaking bones of sickly palaces above their damp green beards, under the windows we suddenly heard the famished roar of the automobiles."[33]

Innovation was at war with the present; looking at speed as a deity coming to replace the old ones of religion and institution, the futurists anticipated collapse and welcomed it with open arms. The manifesto, then, called for a complete break from history, art and culture of the past in a suicidal rant, vowing to destroy museums, cemeteries, the old cities of Rome, and even oneself to reach the goal of acceleration. "The oldest of us is thirty…" Marinetti wrote. "When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts—we want it to happen!"[34]

While the Futurist manifesto had political undertones that integrated into Fascist politics in the 1920s, Filippo Marinetti originally explored Futurist aesthetics through the lens of theatre.[35] His 1913 essay "On the Variety Theatre," for example, demonstrated the application of

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[33] Marinetti, Filippo. "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism (1909)," in *Marinetti: Selected Writings,* ed. R.W. Flint, trans. R.W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1972.), 39.
[34] *Ibid.,* 43.
[35] Marinetti was a close friend of Benito Mussolini and co-wrote the first Fascist Manifesto in 1919.

futurist ideology into the realms of theatre which, as he later argued, would eventually destroy its barriers with reality. He heavily based his 1913 essay, *The Variety Theatre,* on the *Ubu Roi* premiere, even stating that an ideal theatre experience should "invent new elements of astonishment" and embrace "the whole gamut of stupidity, imbecility, doltishness, and absurdity, insensibly pushing the intelligence to the very border of madness."[36] More importantly, Marinetti's own theories about theatre provided a link among important playwrights in other parts of the continent.

Antonin Artaud, an avid admirer of the Italian playwright who adopted futurist motifs to later develop his Dada-surrealist aesthetic, is a prime example of a personal and intellectual connection between Marinetti and other avant-garde pioneers. By the time Antonin Artaud had established his own career in the 1920s, Filippo Marinetti had moved back to Rome to produce experimental films with his Pittaluga Company studio. However, as shown by a 1930 letter sent to his psychiatrist's wife, Artaud had previously engaged with the Italian playwright. First, Artaud, in the voice of Madame Allendy, mentioned the fact that Marinetti had read one of his poems (*The Umbilicus of Limbo*) before, and that the French playwright was acutely aware of Marinetti's current projects. Then, Artaud (as Allendy) wrote,

> "'I [Allendy] enclose some photographic documents that will give you an idea of the stark and forceful style that [Artaud] introduced into his work in staging, whose effect is sometimes agonizing, compelling, and very contemporary…Dr. Allendy and myself would be very grateful for anything you could do to enable Mr. Artaud to play any unusual character parts…in Rome. Once he is there, Mr. Artaud could personally tell you his ideas regarding the talking or sound film.'"[37]

Notice how Artaud described his work with words Marinetti often used in his previous manifestos for futurism. Yet, further down the letter, Artaud began to explain how his lighting

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[36] Marinetti, Filippo. "The Variety Theatre (1913)" in *Marinetti: Selected Writings.* 117.
[37] Artaud, Antonin. "Letter to Yvonne Allendy." In *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings,* ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 174-175.

and cinematographic effects could reveal "all secrets of the unconscious," a mystical property that fell more under surrealism, an evolution of futurism and Dada that appeared around a decade later. Plus, when looking at *Umbilicus of Limbo,* the poem Marinetti *had* read, we can see that Artaud applied futurist rhetoric—of one man standing alone to kill nature and the world order—to his own, violent poetic imagery of killing, stabbing, and watching the Earth rot.[38] These two sources reveal a key fact of our understanding of artists' perception of the avant-garde: artists of different nations were actively trying to reach each other and collaborate *throughout* the era, not just in stages.

Futurism in Eastern Europe can be seen principally in the works of Mykhail Semenko, the founder of the Ukrainian Futurist group. In his 1914 poetry collection titled *Derzannia* ("Audacity")—his introduction to the world as a futurist writer and thinker— he used Marinetti's ideas about shedding the provincial yoke of the past and choosing instead a new reality of movement and innovation. Semenko recognized the transformative power of art in culture, and how the art of the present could not be bound by outdated, cultural "cults." The collection itself was intentionally published in February 1914, on the centennial of the birth of Taras Shevchenko, the great Ukrainian poet and national symbol of the romantic and patriotic. At that point in Ukrainian History, intellectuals in the nation were concerned with the assembly of 'Ukrainian culture.' In the fight for independence from Russia and Soviet hegemony, Ukrainian intellectuals looked toward tradition and connection with peasant roots to preserve their own sense of a national identity. Shevchenko, then, became a symbol for romanticizing the peasant countryside, national symbols, and provincial life. And his first poetry collection, the *Kobzar*, was held in high esteem in Ukrainian literary circles.

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[38] Artaud, Antonin. "With me is god-the-dog and its tongue," in *Umbilicus of Limbo,* trans. R.J. Dent. http://www.literaryorphans.org/playdb/antonin-artaud-six-poems-revolt-against-poetry-translated-by-r-j-dent/

Semenko and the futurists wanted to challenge the impression left by 19th-Century romantic poetry and looked to Marinetti to inspire their art. To Semenko, Shevchenko's romantic poetry had become canonized in Ukrainian cultural circles. In his manifesto 'poem' titled "I Alone," Semenko wrote,

> "You bring me debased 'ideas' about art and it makes me sick. Man, art is something you haven't even dreamt of. I want to tell you, that where there is a cult, there is no art. And most importantly, [art] doesn't fear attack. Quite the contrary. It is strengthened when attacked. But you've latched on to your *Kobzar*, which smells of wagon grease and lard, and you think that your reverence will protect it. […] How can I revere Shevchenko [the author of the 1840 Kobzar], when I see that he is under my feet?"[39]

The manifesto reads almost identical to Marinetti's, even borrowing some literary critiques that first appeared in Marinetti's 1909 "Let's Murder the Moonshine," a violent call to destroy the romantic clichés of literature at the time. In a way, Semenko channeled Marinetti's nausea of the "immense intoxication of the old European sun…vomiting itself to infinity," and directly responded to the Ukrainian cultural debate at the time.[40]

And it was not only in Kyiv but in Moscow as well where futurists were adopting Marinetti's philosophy to revitalize modern culture. Marinetti's first manifesto was reprinted and widely distributed in *Apollon*, a Russian literary magazine, a year after its original 1909 publication date. Soon after, a whole feature on futurist paintings and Marinetti's technical manifesto were printed in the same magazine, and the "cult of speed" overtook modernist circles in Moscow.[41] Speed in different mediums manifested most clearly through the development of *zaum* ("beyond the mind"), or sound poetry composed of a short-hand Russian language with no

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[39] Mykhail Semenko, "I Alone." *Derzannia*. *Poemy* [Bravado. Poems] (Kyiv: Kvero, 1914), 1. A translated version is cited in Ilnytzkyj, Oleh S. "Cultural Revolution: Mykhail Semenko, Ukrainian Futurism and the 'National' Category." *Kyvi-Mohyla Humanities Journal 4* (2017): 46-48.
[40] Marinetti, "Let's Murder the Moonshine (1909)" in *Marinetti: Selected Writings*. 45.
[41] Harte, Tim. *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed In Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 38. https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/2027/heb08756.0001.001

possible translations to other languages. Modeled after Marinetti's 1913 "Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without Strings—Words in Freedom" manifesto, Russian poets wanted *zaum* to be visual, sonic, and physical.[42] Artists would handwrite a combination of nonsensical and ancient Slavic syllables to capture the *expression* of the word, not the definition of it. A famous example would be Russian poet Aleksei Kruchyonykh's "Dyr bul Shchyl," a 1912 poem written entirely in syllabic scribbles. Ukrainian poets like Mykhail Semenko and Vasilik Gnedov participated in beyond-sense poetry, sometimes fusing Slavic syllables with Arabic, German, and Sub-Saharan African languages to create even more universal yet incomprehensible sounds.[43] Kazimir Malevich, who also had a personal connection to Kruchyonykh through the 1913 stage production of *A Victory Over the Sun,* even dabbled in Ukrainian *zaum,* mostly applying some of its philosophy to set designs and abstract art.[44] For Russian and Ukrainian intellectuals, *zaum* became the way to completely enter the realm of abstraction, diverging from their Western counterparts, who had not yet 'liberated' themselves completely from grammar and syntax.[45]

Thus, by the 1920s, Russian futurists had split off from their Italian, and even Ukrainian, brothers, evolving the philosophy into something unique to their own needs. So, while futurism itself began in 1909, a unique Ukrainian futurism appeared around 1913, and Russian futurism began around the 1920s—a chain of several beginnings that overlap and develop the futurist aesthetic together.

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[42] Chesley, Ian. "Handwriting, Typography, Illustration: The Visual Word of the Russian Avant-Garde" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), 9.
[43] Horbachov, Dmytro. "In the Epicentre of Abstraction: Kyiv during the Time of Kurbas." In *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Expression,* ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010): 184-189. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442686373-006
[44] Hunter, Isobel. "*Zaum* and Sun: the 'first Futurist opera' revisited." *Central Europe Review 1,* no. 3 (1999). https://www.pecina.cz/files/www.ce-review.org/99/3/ondisplay3_hunter.html
[45] Harte, *Fast Forward.* 40-41.

Kyiv, 1910: David Burliuk (1882-1967)

Ukrainian and Russian futurism had more than just *zaum* and ant-czarist sentiment to separate themselves from Marinetti: they also developed neo-primitivism, first explored by David Burliuk. Neo-primitivism in the Ukrainian context carried a slightly different interpretation than classic fauvism, which was championed by Western avant-garde artists like Gaugin, Derain, and Matisse. The word "fauvism" first appeared in an art critic's review of the 1905 Salon d'Automne, where Matisse and Derain debuted their new art style for the first time. Fauvism, according to the article, was the art of "wild beasts"—the literal translation of *fauves*—or art that looked formless, childlike with its bright colors, and primitive. Matisse, presenting *Woman with a Hat*, painted like a "circus beast," according to the critic, replacing realistic depictions of his subject with wild, unnatural colors.[46] The fauvists primarily took inspiration from a colonialist perspective on African, Asian, Oceanic, and sometimes Eastern European art, overemphasizing the fantasy of living in a 'non-civilized' world. Matisse's *Joy of Life (c. 1905),* for example, depicts a Garden of Eden-like scene, with people reclining, dancing, playing music, and having sex. The one-dimensionality of the painting stems directly from Matisse's interpretation of African art, which he believed 'lacked' a certain corruption of European civilization—a 'pure' and 'innocent' art that depicted fantasies of 'creatures of nature' rather than actual people.

[46] Vauxcelles, Louis. "Le Salon d'Automne," *Gil Blas,* October 17, 1905. 5-6. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7522165g/f5.item.zoom

Figure 1.1: Matisse's Joy of Life (c. 1905).[47]

Ukrainian neo-primitivism, however, looked toward its own past as inspiration, taking the icons of Byzantine art and Slavic history to revitalize them in a modern context, often adopting either art nouveau or cubist painting styles to "modernize" the designs. While other Europeans looked at a racialized version of a non-Europe to inspire their art, Ukrainian artists used primitivism to explore their relationship with their national and ethnic identity.

Even for critics at the time, understanding how neo-primitivism could lead Ukraine into a modern future proved difficult. In 1928, one critic acknowledged that neo-primitivism relied on celebrating the peasant class, and that it could not imagine an urban future for the nation. "But," he continued, "in the process of elevating the peasantry to creativity and culture, it is playing a significant role as an art which […] can best fulfill the artistic demands of precisely this peasant mass."[48] The critic acknowledged that for the nation, the urban population was very small, and did not represent the cultural majority of Ukraine. While the infusion of a past—one that could resonate with most people and assist in the development of the national identity—with a contemporary subject and painting style did not propose an imagined "future" like the futurists

[47] Matisse, Henri. *Le bonheur de vivre (The Joy of Life).* 1905. Oil on canvas, 69 1/2 x 94 3/4 in. Barnes Collection, Philadelphia. https://collection.barnesfoundation.org/objects/7199/Le-Bonheur-de-vivre-also-called-The-Joy-of-Life/

[48] Vrona, Ivan. "Suchasni techni v ukrainskomu maliarstvi," *Krytyka,* no. 2 (1928): 91. Translated into English in Skhandrij, *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation.* 166.

did, it still offered a transformation of life and society through its art. They challenged and transformed folk art into a legitimate experiment with form, medium, and representation; they brought the past into a modern world. For David Burliuk, then, neo-primitivism was the modernist solution to restoring Ukrainian culture to its greatest form. Farm animals, countryside imagery, and peasant life remained the subject of his work, merging his contemporary society with the aesthetics of a distant past.

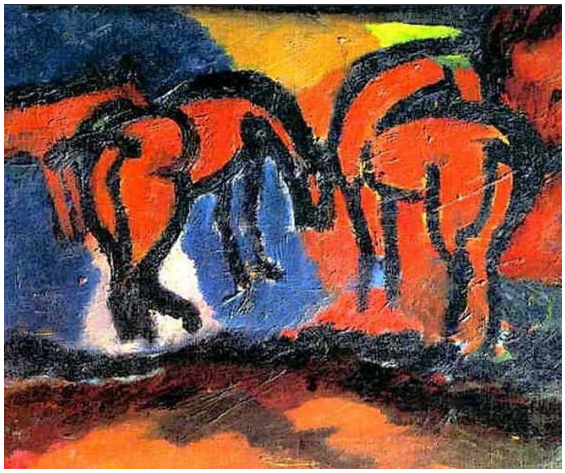

Figure 1.2: David Burliuk's Horses *(1908).*[49]

David Burliuk, like most avant-garde artists, spent his formative years travelling to art schools across the continent. Before returning to his father's estate in central Ukraine around 1908, Burliuk studied impressionist landscape art in Kazan, Odesa, Munich, and Paris, connecting with other emerging artists in the modern art scene in the process. It was no doubt that his father and two brothers, also well-integrated into the Ukrainian and Russian art world, assisted in his rise to notoriety. His father managed the Chornianka estate—a temporary home for Eastern European avant-gardists, including Alexsei Kruchyonykh, Wassily Kandinsky, Benedikt Livshits, and Mikhail Larionov—and his brothers co-founded David's entourage of

[49] Burliuk, David. *Horses.* 1908. Oil on canvas. Public domain, Ukraine. https://www.wikiart.org/en/david-burliuk/horses-1908

notable artists: the Hylaea Group. Russian artist Elena Guro, who offered her St. Petersburg home as a second base, also joined the Burliuk brothers, Livshits, Kruchyonykh, and other members in 1910. Altogether, the Hylaea Group travelled all over Eastern Europe to manage exhibitions in their art style, displaying their works in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.[50] In 1913, the Hylaea Group would become central figures, alongside Semenko and Malevich, in developing modernism in Eastern Europe.

The name "Hylaea" originates from the Scythian territories out in Ukraine from the Ancient Greek empire. The territories, often described as a primitive wasteland in Greek texts, are associated with Hercules, who, according to Herodotus' *Histories*, dwelled and achieved some of his greatest feats there. The Hylaea Group, in David Burliuk's vision, wanted to connect modern Ukraine to its ancient past, often taking inspiration from its mystical *and* mythical past from both Ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire. Bright colors, two-dimensional figures, sharp angles, and fantastical battle motifs—the Scythian warrior almost became synonymous with the Ukrainian Cossack—recurred greatly in Burliuk's paintings. This became Burliuk's neo-primitivism: borrowing images, textures, and folktales from a national past to modern forms, colors, and conceptions of expression and movement.[51] Unlike Marinetti, whose futurist art coincided with the works of the Hylaea Group, Burliuk *embraced* his cultural past and gave it a symbolic property in modern times, even believing that it connected him to a more holistic world. "As with other artists," one scholar wrote, "primitivism allowed Burliuk to avoid following the beaten path, and to articulate an authentic, personal view of life…But his

[50] Skhandrij, Myroslav. *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910-1930: Contested Memory* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 82-83. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781618119766

[51] Mudrak, Myroslava M. "Incidental Modernism: Episodes of Symbolism in Modern Ukrainian Art." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, no. 3-4 (2019): 307–50. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48585320.

primitivism is perhaps best grasped as an almost mystical union with the earth and vitality of common people."[52]

Burliuk's Hylaea Group was well-connected with Russian circles since its beginnings, yet it also remained historically and artistically close with French and Italian circles. Burliuk's other art group that overlapped with his own, *Jack of Diamonds* (founded by Russians Mikhail Larinov and Natalia Gonchorova), came together due to their enthusiasm for French primitive art, primarily the works of Paul Cézanne, Henri Rousseau, Paul Gaugin, and Henri Matisse. This group regularly curated exhibits that combined the works of the French artists—often borrowed from the private gallery of Russian art collector and friend of Henri Matisse, Sergei Shchukin—next to the Germanic and/or Russian 'evolution' of their art (Kandinsky, Exter, Larinov, Gonchorova, Malevich, and Tatlin). Their works and galleries even reached audiences abroad, showcasing the links between the Eastern European modernists and their Western "lineage." The 1907 Salon d'Automne in Paris, for instance (the same art exhibition Matisse presented his *Joy of* Life), also debuted the works of Eastern European 'moderns' (i.e., Valentine Serov, Alexandre Benois, and Mikhail Larionov), curated by Sergei Diaghilev.[53] Many of the artists within the *Jack of Diamonds* group went on to establish long careers in Central and Western Europe, often collaborating with fellow modernists on larger, more theatrical projects.[54] Some examples include Alexandra Exter's frequent collaboration as a set designer with the Ballet russes in Paris, as well as Picasso and Matisse, who often designed the costumes for the same ballets. Malevich reached international fame in France, Germany, the United States, and Moscow and worked as a

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[52] Skhandrij, *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine,* 94.
[53] Eksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). 22-23.
[54] Bowlt, John E. "Jacks and Tails." *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 60/61 (2002): 15–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20168613.

set designer for multiple operas and theatre performers. Burliuk himself ended up moving to the United States in the early 1920s, contributing to the New York branch of the international avant-garde until his death in 1967.

Mykhailo Boichuk, another Ukrainian neo-primitivist, managed to garner much attention from an international audience throughout the 1920s. Boichuk continued and popularized Burliuk's project to revive a cultural Ukrainian past in 20th-Century standards, but his evolution of the style had an even stronger background in modernism. Born to a peasant family in the Ukrainian countryside, Boichuk left for Munich and Paris prior to returning to Lviv to study with painters such as Franz von Stuck (the mentor of other famous painters, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky), Maurice Denis, and Kazimir Malevich. These artists introduced him to abstraction, encouraging him to challenge form, conventions, and color of a painting. Thus, though his scenes were influenced by neo-primitivism and Byzantine-era art, his style had a dynamism associated with cubists and abstract artists that was very modern for the time.[55] Furthermore, his production for Soviet propaganda posters stressed the importance of industry and simplicity, as his designs required copies by the thousands to display all over Ukraine. In these posters, he combined Ukrainian cultural iconography with simple yet expressive line work, primary colors, and geometric shapes, making them visually appealing, recognizable, and easily reproducible.

[55] Skhandrij, *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine. 47-49.*

Figure 1.3: Boichuk School's Propaganda Poster, Exlibris (*c. 1925)*[56]

Boichuk's art became particularly famous not only in Europe, but in the world, as his school's artwork displayed in exhibitions in Florence and Brussels (1927), Venice (1928 and 1930), and Amsterdam (1929).[57] In 1927, Boichuk also participated in the Moscow celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, gaining the attention of Mexican painter Diego Rivera, who also was invited to represent the Communist Party of Mexico and paint a portrait of Stalin.[58] Rivera met Boichuk there, alongside several Eastern European artists, and the Soviet art would have a lasting impact on his art.

Conclusion

When thinking about internationalism in the historical avant-garde, we can turn to a thought expressed by Mykhail Semenko in 1927. "It is necessary to strenuously and seriously promote organic, progressive processes in our culture," he wrote, "for it is not through

[56] Boichuk, Mykhailo. *Exlibris.* Illustration. C. 1925, Ukraine. https://www.wikiart.org/en/mykhailo-boychuk/exlibris-1925
[57] Skhandrij. *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation.* 167.
[58] Rivera identified strongly with the Communist Party in Mexico (PCM) and was a representative of the Mexican Peasants League. However, his relationship with the PCM frayed around 1925, where Rivera resigned and joined the Stalinist Party a year later. González, Alex. "Diego Rivera in the Soviet Union: An exhibition in Mexico City." *World Socialist Website.* January 12, 2018. https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2018/01/12/rive-j12.html

squandering of the old but through the creation of new values that we will arrive…in the 'real Europe'…"[59] Semenko understood the transformative property of art, and how it could guide artists to a new lifestyle based on the principles of their preferred art style. In Semenko's case, by breaking with the past—all its baggage, all its nationalism, all its localized cultures—artists could create a new society together; Europe could finally be unified under one, solid identity around art.

So, prior to the peak of the historical avant-garde, artists had already built a strong, collaborative network through their efforts to travel, exhibit their pieces abroad, and meet each other. In this period of frequent, cross-continental migration, artists associated with the beginnings of the historical avant-garde cultivated a spirit of internationalism—of using art to create a new Europe based on unity and modernism. As we saw with Semenko, as well as many others, avant-garde artists used their experimental art forms to cultivate a *European* identity, not just a national or individual one, as part of their goal to forge a better society.

[59] Semenko, Mykhail. "Reflections on Why Ukrainian Nationalism is Bad for Ukranian Culture, or Why Internationalism is Good for It," *Bumeranh 1* (1927): 4-5. A translated version can be found here: Ilnytzkyj. "Cultural Revolution." 51.

II. Two Theatres, One Legacy: Les Kurbas and Antonin Artaud

"We are witnessing a great upheaval in world theatre and everybody who has fresh ideas will essentially do the same thing, in spite of different conditions and combinations." -Les Kurbas, 1923[60]

In the 1920s and the early 30s, the medium of experimental theatre was a breeding ground for a new, internationalist world where Western and Eastern Europe could work together. This chapter recounts the history of a theatre company—or, rather, two—and how the ambitions of one director in Western Ukraine had a far-reaching influence on seemingly unrelated artists.

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) was born in Marseilles and lived most of his life in Paris, save the brief tour of Mexico and Ireland in the 1930s. His short-lived theatre company, the Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry, is widely considered the foundation for modern experimental theatre, as its mission and tenure offered a transformative approach to theatre that emphasized space and corporeality over dialogue, breaking all known conventions in Western theatre. Les Kurbas (1887-1937) is not *as* known of a figure in the arts in Western audiences. Born in a small city outside Lviv, Ukraine, Kurbas was arguably one of the most important figures in Ukrainian art history, if not in modern art history in general. The playwright and director revolutionized experimental performing arts with his Berezil Theatre, a collaborative company that blended Western and Eastern aesthetics into adaptations of Western classics and Ukrainian originals, often with the help of other accomplished directors. In Ukrainian futurist and avant-garde circles, Kurbas' repertoire transcended "beyond the boundaries of national culture" and had "broken into universal productive and creative pursuits."[61] In the 1920s, Kurbas had gained a respected, international status.

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[60] Kurbas, Les. "Shlakhy Berezilya." *VAPLITE,* no. 3 (1927), 141-165. Quoted in: Revutsky, V. "Mykola Kulish in the Modern Ukrainian Theatre." 358. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4206410.
[61] Semenko, "Reflections," 5-6. Translated and cited in Illytzkyj, "Cultural Revolution." 51.

There are many similarities on how Kurbas and Artaud thought a deeper understanding of theatres from outside one's own country would influence their repertoire in profound ways, and, though there is not much evidence of direct collaboration, we must consider them to be contemporaries in the same network of experimental theatre. Artaud's apoliticality—or his strong belief that a new, international life shaped by theatre would not include any sort of politics—aligned closely to Kurbas' vision of a Europe where distinct national identities could be recognized yet considered as equal with the rest of the continents, not silenced by oppressive forces. Furthermore, their approaches to acting styles, to performance theory, and to using the theatre to promote artistic collaboration are strikingly alike. So, I will trace the history of Kurbas' ideas from their origins in Kharkiv to its legacy in Artaud's Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry, demonstrating how the seemingly unrelated artists served as each other's active contemporaries. I argue, then, that we can use the example of the historical connection between Kurbas and Artaud to provide further evidence that avant-garde artists depended on a highly collaborative intellectual exchange between Eastern and Western European artists—regardless of politics or geographic distance—to produce some of their most innovative works.

The Multinational Berezil Theatre

Before Antonin Artaud would establish the 1926 Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry, Les Kurbas founded the Berezil Theatre in 1922.[62] "Berezil," the Ukrainian word for "March" evoked a multitude of revolutionary feelings for Ukrainians. First, the month of March elicited memories

[62] The founding of the Berezil Theatre coincided with the early 1920s implementation of the Ukrainization policy of the Soviet Union, a new law that would allow for poetry, theatre, novels, schoolbooks, and more to be published in the Ukrainian language. Soviet leaders intended for the Ukrainians to politically assimilate into the Soviet Union and contribute to the greater "Soviet identity," yet indigenization policies, especially in the hands of staunch critics (like Kurbas) of Russian chauvinism, only reinforced national identities. Blitstein, Peter A. "Cultural Diversity and the Interwar Conjuncture: Soviet Nationality Policy in Its Comparative Context." *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 283. https://doi.org/10.2307/4148593.

of March 1917, the date of the beginning of the Ukrainian war for independence from Russia. Like the springtime—a season of change, blossoming, growth, and optimism—Ukrainian revolutionaries saw a new world of opportunities unfurling for the nation. Theatre especially transformed that month, as theatre artists representing different, state-funded groups from all over the country met in Kyiv for a national theatre council. Kurbas was designated as secretary. Artists at the meeting decided to publish a newspaper (*Teatralni visti,* or "Theatrical News") to discuss the latest innovations and developments in Ukrainian theatre, which would have its first publication two weeks after the council.[63] The artists present would soon also establish the Committee to Create a National Ukrainian Theatre, which was composed of representatives from many artistic fields and all had the aim to establish a modern, national theatre that could have the same prestige as their Western European counterparts.

The Berezil Theatre was *not* Kurbas' first project: in 1916, Kurbas had founded the "Young Theatre," an ambitious project that brought Western plays to the Ukrainian stage, sometimes as the first existing translations of these texts into his native language. The "Young Theatre" aimed to create a new type of actor—one who "grasped the world intuitively" instead of merely imitating it—and a deeper exploration of Ukrainian culture that could be understood and celebrated on a universal level. However, this theatrical project was short-lived: after the 1918 re-invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, the production group was Sovietized and split into two factions: Kurbas' more avant-garde leaning wing (which would later transform into the Kyiv Drama Theatre, then Berezil), and the Russian traditionalist wing.[64]

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[63] The exact date of the theatrical council in Kyiv is March 12, 1917. The first publication of *Theatrical News* was April 1, 1917. Veselovska, Hanna. "Kyiv's Multicultural Theatrical Life, 1917-1926." In *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Expression,* ed. Irena Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010): 243.

[64] Mudrak, Myroslava. "Vadym Meller, Les Kurbas and the Ukrainian Theatrical Avant-Garde: Hello from Wave 477." *Russian History* 8, no. 1/2 (1981): 200. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24652394.

Kurbas' vision of theatre hinged on his staunch opposition to Soviet Russian oppression of Ukrainian culture. 'Little Russian provincialism,' as Kurbas and other Ukrainian intellectuals argued, purposefully degraded the status of innovative art Ukrainians were producing in the major cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv.[65] In response, Kurbas' company depended on embracing diversity in his collaborative space. In the *Barykady teatru*, a theatrical magazine edited and published by the Berezil beginning in 1922, Kurbas wrote:

> "Berezil is not creating a Communist culture at this time and is not founding a Communist theater, although it accepts into its ranks those who entertain such ideas and the metaphysics connected therewith. ... In Berezil the intuitivist and the intellectualist, the constructivist and the expressionist, the sympathizer with the Proletcult ideology and the eccentric can and do work together."[66]

By attempting to forcefully assimilate Ukrainian political life into the Russian one, the Soviet Union aimed to cut off cultural connection between Ukraine and the rest of Europe, especially the West. Thus, central to Kurbas' mission of the Berezil was to *keep* this connection with the rest of Europe, as it would prevent his company from being fully absorbed by communist aesthetics and ideology.

Kurbas' openness to international collaboration may have originated from his educational background in Western Europe, as well as the multiethnic reality of Western Ukraine at the time. Lviv, the city where Kurbas grew up before establishing his theatre in Kharkiv, was a cultural center of Ukraine during the historical avant-garde, as well as the home for a large population of a myriad of ethnic groups, including Poles, Austrians, Germans, and Eastern European Jews. Kurbas most likely first became acquainted with German theatre in Ukraine. The playwright enrolled as a philosophy student at the University of Vienna, where he was further exposed to

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[65] Kharkiv was the capital of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine until 1934.

[66] I was not able to find directly translated collections of Kurbas' writings and reflections on the Berezil Theatre. Translated excerpt found here: Hirniak, Y. "Birth and Death of the Modern Ukrainian Theater." In *Soviet Theaters, 1917-1941,* ed. Martha Bradshaw (New York: Brooklyn College Research Program on the USSR, 1954): 290.

Austrian and German theatre under the mentorship of famous Austro-Hungarian actor Josef Kainz. Kurbas also spoke fluent German and translated and gave lectures on numerous German dramas before founding the Berezil Theatre. He had a particular affinity for the expressionist dramas of Max Reinhardt, an Austrian-German playwright and director often credited as the 'father' of the German theatrical renaissance, as well as Kurbas' contemporary, as both playwrights were highly active between the years 1917-1930s. Thus, some of the first German expressionist plays entered Eastern European theatrical circles through Kurbas' own contributions and Ukrainian adaptations. As he admitted in a literary magazine after a Russian critic accused him of copying a Muscovite's play concept for his 1923 staging of Upton Sinclair's *Jimmie Higgins,* German plays and the Western avant-garde was not only accessible to the Soviet Russians, "but also to us—in Lviv and Kharkiv."[67]

Kurbas did produce many plays written by Ukrainians during the prime of the Berezil: for instance, famous Ukrainian playwright Mykola Kulish produced several works for the theatre, including the anti-Soviet satirical trilogy *Narodnii Malakhii* ("The People's Malakhii," 1927), *Sonata Pathétique* (1930), and *Vichnyi bunt* ("Eternal Rebellion," 1932). However, the structure of the Berezil Theatre encouraged internationalism: Kurbas' curated seasons of shows included many plays from classic and contemporary playwrights all over the Western World. Plays by Molière, Hugo, Shaw, Strindberg, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Żuławski, and Kaiser were all translated, adapted, and staged for Ukrainian audiences throughout the tenure of the Berezil. And, despite making the conscious effort to refuse any of their plays to be staged under the Berezil name,

[67] L. Kurbas, "Shlakhy Berezilya." *VAPLITE,* no. 3 (1927), 141-165. Quoted in: V. Revutsky. "Mykola Kulish in the Modern Ukrainian Theatre." 358.

Kurbas *did* allow one Russian director to put on a production, remaining true to his philosophy that all ideas would be welcome in the Berezil.[68]

Lastly, the plays Kurbas himself wrote greatly demonstrated his keen sense of Western modernism, and how those motifs and values perfectly blended with his interpretation of Ukrainian culture and nationhood. In 1929 Kurbas staged a production of *Hello from Wave 477,* a satirical play about Soviet consumer culture, written in the point of view of a Ukrainian radio station broadcasting to Western Europe. The play took the form of a sketch show filled with dancing, slapstick comedy, singing, and theatricality depicting the absurdities of modern Soviet life, and different sketches were directed by other Ukrainian artists.[69] Variety theatre had been popularized in cities like Berlin, Paris, and New York prior to the staging of *Hello from Wave 477.* Furthermore, the concept of radio—a modern invention meant for mass communication—that underlay the theme of the show was interpreted as a broadcasting of a different life to Western audiences. By taking a medium most people in Western Europe engaged with on an everyday basis, Kurbas' production opened their world to his own, and he asserted that Ukraine had the same technological innovation to speak to them, too.[70]

So, through his translation work and theatrical innovation, Les Kurbas of Lviv imported Western theatrical tradition to Eastern Europe, creating a new kind of theatre that blended avant-garde ideas of the West with a Ukrainian imagination of a world that did not require communism to achieve internationalism. In this case, Kurbas became an example of an artist well-connected

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[68] Pikulyk, Romana B. "The Expressionist Experiment in Berezil': Kurbas and Kulish." *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 14, no. 2 (1972): 326. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40866437.

[69] Vadym Meller—a famous set and costume designer educated in Munich and well-established in Berlin, Paris, and Kyiv—designed the costumes and set for the show, highly stylizing the setting with concentric circles sharply dividing curtains of velvet.

[70] Mudrak, Myroslava M. "Hello from Wave 477." 204-205.

to the rest of the continent—engaged with his contemporaries and adamant in envisioning his own international theatre.

The Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs, 1925

From April to October in 1925, over fifteen million people flocked to the center of Paris to attend the International Exposition of Modern and Industrial Decorative Arts. The opening ceremony of the event encapsulated how meaningful this moment would become for the French at the time. The procession included a grandiose appearance by the French military (performing the gun salute and leading the cavalry), huge gatherings of all kinds of professionals and art enthusiasts, celebrations in and outside French architectural beauties, and the literal opening of the larger-than-life gate to the Exposition by President Doumergue.[71] 22 countries came to participate in the demonstrations and compete for awards, given to the 'most modern' artist or work of art in a specific category. Of the approximate 22 countries, nearly all of them were European, but Asian and North African countries were also invited, mostly due to their colonial ties to France.[72] Modernity and goodwill were the two rules of the competition: as long as representatives from a country submitted an original, never-before-seen piece of art, they were entitled to their own exhibit in Paris. Furthermore, radio was installed all over the exposition grounds so that the ceremony could be broadcasted not only to other parts of France, but to the rest of Europe as well—this truly would become, as the French intended, a world-class spectacle.

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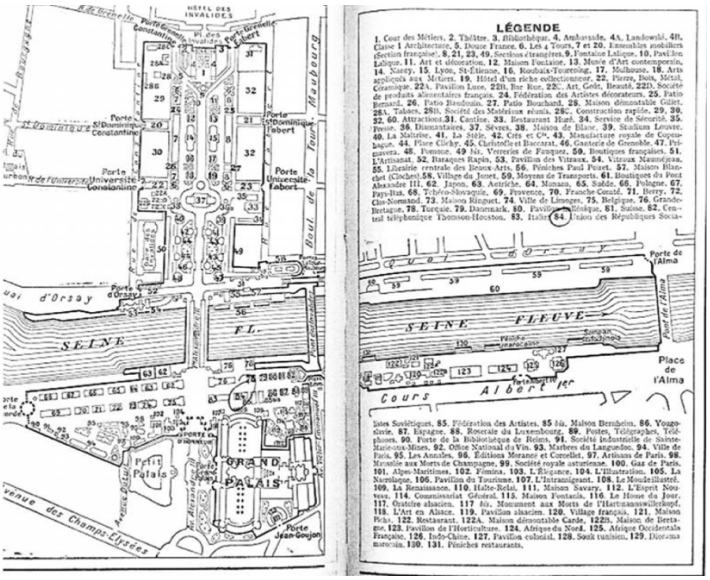
[71] British Pathé News. "The French Wembley," April 1925, news reel, 4:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_gMZq5BReo.
[72] Mattie, Erik. *World's Fairs* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 140. http://archive.org/details/worldsfairs0000matt.



1.1: A map of the Exposition, accompanied by a legend of each exhibit's location.[73]

Like all the countries that sent representatives to compete, the Soviet Union had their own pavilion (designed by Konstantin Melnikov) in front of the Grand Palais (lot #84). However, according to an accompanying art catalogue printed by the Soviet Union listing every USSR entry participating, the USSR, unlike other European competitors, had six rooms in the Grand Palais as well. These rooms would solely be dedicated to the artists working in Soviet theatre.[74] On a much wider scope, the heavy Soviet presence in the Exposition—initially planned to be dominated by the French hosts, who occupied most of the buildings—demonstrated how in-tune Eastern Europeans were to Western, modernist culture. Dazzling set designs and theatrical productions from all over Russia, Poland, and Ukraine proved to international audiences that the East did not live in a backwards, rural vacuum but in the same cutting-edge, advanced society as their Western counterparts. Most importantly, this is where the Berezil

[73] I was not able to find an original copy of a map for the event. This is a reproduction provided by Makaryk, Irena. *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Expression*. 481.

[74] Maison du Conseil de Guerre Révolutionnaire de l'U.R.S.S., "Catalogue des oeuvres d'art décoratif et d'industrie artistique exposées dans le pavillon de l'U.R.S.S. au Grand Palais et dans les galeries de l'Esplanade des Invalides" (Librarie Militaire d'État (G.W.I.Z.), 1925), 99-114. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k322853z.

Theatre arrived in Paris, and where they would finally gain international recognition for their innovations in the performance arts.

Berezil representation at the Exposition came at a political price. According to Soviet law, the Berezil Theatre had to register for the event under the USSR, even if the indigenization policy gave Ukraine cultural and political autonomy. Furthermore, the French government formally recognized the Soviet Union as a legitimate government a year prior to the Exposition, and the Soviet Union, in French politics, also included the satellite nations of Ukraine and Poland.[75] More extreme Western perspectives on Eastern European ideas of nationality did not even consider places like Ukraine to be *capable* of forming a national identity, so making the effort to distinguish where the theatres were actually located and who managed them seemed superfluous to them.[76] The differences of nationalities that made up the USSR, to Western nation-states, were negligible, and the Soviet-printed catalogue introducing the artists and pieces on display purposefully reaffirmed Western misconceptions that "Russian" and "Soviet" were interchangeable.[77] Second, no Ukrainian-born artists, including Kurbas, were allowed to travel to Paris and attend the Exposition. Vadym Meller and a small selection of directors—the sole representatives of the Berezil Theater in Paris—were the exception: though he spent most of his life either in Ukraine or in the West, Meller was born in St. Petersburg, so Russians had a valid

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[75] Special Cable to *The New York Times*, "FRANCE RECOGNIZES SOVIET GOVERNMENT; Herriot's Announcement Believed to Have Been Timed to Help MacDonald," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1924, sec. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1924/10/29/archives/france-recognizes-soviet-government-herriots-announcement-believed.html.

[76] "The same principle dominated British policy in the matter of Eastern Galicia. Our government was averse to assigning to Poland a province mainly inhabited by Little Russians who differed from the Poles in race, speech and religion and who stoutly proclaimed their desire for autonomy." Fisher, Herbert A.L. "Mr. Lloyd George's Foreign Policy 1918-1922." *Foreign Affairs,* March 15, 1923. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-kingdom/1923-03-15/mr-lloyd-georges-foreign-policy-1918-1922

[77] The catalogue, printed in French, intentionally did not call any of the artists "Soviet" or any other nationalities. All artists were referred to as "Russian." Furthermore, the catalogue's introduction to the theatrical submissions clearly favored the Moscow theatres despite most of the theatres coming from other cities and nations.

claim to his national identity. Their art was 'spoken for' by Russians, and their legacy as a successful Ukrainian theatre company would be swept under the Bolshevik rug.

However, despite their cultural erasure, the Berezil Theatre still celebrated a success, and an enormous one: Meller's 20 mock-ups of set designs for one of Kurbas' Berezil productions won a gold medal, and an international audience finally noticed the pure creativity of Ukrainian artists like Kurbas—even if they only caught a glimpse of it. Furthermore, the possibilities the East could bring to the West were recognized, and artists in the West were buzzing with excitement over "Russian" theatre.

The Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry: Bringing the World to France

At the same time the Exposition ran in Paris, Antonin Artaud still associated with André Breton and the Surrealist group—though he was soon about to quit the group—and his career as a Parisian film actor and maker began to blossom. Though there is no explicit textual evidence that he attended the Exposition and saw the USSR entries for himself, evidence of his other acting and literary projects affirm that Artaud was highly active in the experimental art scene in Paris in those months. Furthermore, another document published in November 1925, a "Manifesto for a Theater that Failed," could be interpreted as strong evidence that Artaud's art world became more increasingly influenced by Soviet art, and his rapid response to French fascination with Soviet art was timely, published a month after the Exposition ended.

Artaud's manifesto is the clearest evidence of his frustration with communist "revolutionary" theatre, especially its effects on international theatre. He wrote in an addendum,

> "For me there are several ways of understanding Revolution, and among them the Communist way seems by far the worst, the most limited. […] It makes no difference to me, I proclaim in a loud voice, whether the power passes from the hands of the bourgeoisie into those of the proletariat. For me this does not constitute revolution…

> If anything should be blown up, it is the foundations of most of the habits of modern thinking, European or otherwise."[78]

This addendum appears after a call to revitalize theatre through finding mystical, universal images that could apply to any person in any part of the world. Artaud mused on the notion of a "revolutionary theatre," and why his definition of "revolutionary" would have immediately failed compared to a more communist-aligned one. His version of "revolutionary" relied primarily on reviving the 'primordial' forms of the past, bringing the memory of an old 'folk' to the present and inject abstract art to them. He wanted an impossible theatre: he promised magic, manifestations of dreams, scenes that could "speak directly to the mind," and the creation of a "psychological emotion in which the inmost motives of the heart will be laid bare."[79] Communism had no function in this kind of project: to Artaud, communist revolutionaries could not look past the material world, and that their strong sense of what was considered "taboo" prevented any diversity of thought to "take root." As one of Artaud's only concise remarks stated, "Well, I do not recognize any idea as taboo."[80]

The anti-communist, anti-political angle to his theatre project then permitted Artaud to take a similar approach as Kurbas to represent different perspectives on the stage, especially those radically different from Parisian ones. A crucial moment for Artaud, and for the purpose of this chapter, occurs in January 1926: three months after the Exposition ended. At that date, Artaud—alongside his creative partner, Roger Vitrac—established their first and only theatre company, the Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry. The first play would not be performed until 1927, and the project altogether only survived four seasons (ending in 1929). However, despite its failures both

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[78] Artaud, Antonin. "Manifesto for a Theater that Failed (1925)." In *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings,* ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 162.
[79] Artaud, Antonin. "Manifesto for a Theater that Failed (1925)." 161.
[80] *Ibid.,* 162.

overall and with each staged production, the work the theatre produced was cutting-edge. Radical set designs, visual elements unable to be adapted to the stage, stage directions that contradicted everything the human body could do—the Théâtre was nothing but ambitious.[81] Furthermore, the Théâtre became a center for international cultural exchange, as many of the plays produced each season were either directed by or adapted from an artist outside of France. Like his Ukrainian counterpart, Artaud intended for the Théâtre to be a collaborative space—where artists could come together under the sole mission of challenging all theatrical conventions and produce never-before-seen works of art.

The structure of the Théâtre bore many similarities to the Berezil Theatre, and both played their role in bringing texts from the opposite side of the continent to their stages. A brochure detailing the history and mission statement of the Théâtre, published in 1930 by Artaud and Vitrac, provided a list of all the plays produced each season. While many of the plays were Artaud and Vitrac originals—*Ventre Brûlée, ou La Mère Folle* (Artaud, 1927) and *Les Mystères de l'Amour* (Vitrac, 1927) are two famous examples—much of the adaptations came from abroad. The reason, as Artaud explained in the beginning of the brochure, was to prove that spectacles of all kinds were "destined" to be enjoyed by French audiences, and that "all the friendships France has around the world" should be celebrated for their particularities.[82] In the second season in 1928, Artaud screened *La Mère (1926),* a film by Vsevolod Pudovkin titled after a book by Maxim Gorky, and put on a production of Strindberg's *A Dream Play*—the only

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[81] Artaud made a comment regarding the photography of different stage productions, stating that none of the photographs matched the scenery. He wrote, "It was a question of decorating a brochure; we preferred to fabricate the photographed set designs…rather than reproduce the actual scenery from the production." Artaud, Antonin and Roger Vitrac. *Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry et l'hostilité publique.* Booklet, 14, s.n., 1930. Robert J. and Linda Klieger Stillman Pataphysics Collection on the Gordon N. Ray Fund, PML 197100. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

[82] "Les spectacles étant destinés uniquement à un public français, et à tout ce que la France compte d'amitiés par le monde, seront clairs et mesurés." Artaud, Antonin and Roger Vitrac. *Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry et l'hostilité publique.* 8.

one translated into French.[83] The film he chose to screen was intentional: *La Mère* was censored by the French government for its overt communist propaganda, to which Artaud found absurd, considering that the film had its "proper qualities" that deserved to be celebrated, regardless of its political themes.[84] Plus, the Théâtre explicitly protested the idea of censorship, even if Artaud vehemently disagreed with the politics of the film, as political tensions often prevented audiences from witnessing different, refreshing approaches to modern art. Like Kurbas, Artaud was also actively trying to bring both sides of Europe together, arguing that the Western artists could learn many things from their Eastern contemporaries, and that both sides of the continent all had the same goal: to transform life through theatre.

Furthermore, when it came to the actual acting style manifested in both the Berezil Theatre and the Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry, much of Artaud's preferences aligned with Kurbas', as movement was the focal point for both artists. In his essay "The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto," Artaud described his acting technique as an internal, violent war between fiction and reality. He wrote, "The theatre cannot become itself again—that is, it cannot constitute a means of true illusion—unless it provides the spectator the truthful precipitates of his dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his fantasies, […] even his cannibalism, pour out on a level that is not counterfeit […] but internal."[85] The body, in relation to the performance, had to become fully utilized and expressive, prioritizing sensibility and the *act* of acting over dialogue and realism; in its theatricality, it must present how the mind perceives the world. Acting then, became a violent act for Artaud. He wrote,

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[83] It is understood from Artaud's comments that *La Mère* had never been screened in Paris prior to the Théâtre's screening. *Ibid,* 2.
[84] *Ibid.*
[85] This essay was a part of Artaud's greater *The Theatre and Its Double*, written between the years 1931-1936. "The Theatre of Cruelty" is one of the first essays in the collection. Artaud, Antonin. "The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto," in *Antonin Artaud.* 244.

> "Every spectacle will contain a physical and objective element, perceptible to all. Cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatrical tricks of all kinds, […] the incantatory beauty of voices, the charm of harmony, rare notes of music, […] the physical rhythm of movements whose crescendo and decrescendo will blend with the rhythm of movements familiar to everyone…"[86]

Here, Artaud further elaborated on his central idea that theatre must be the violent collision of the individual and collective. Note how he thought of every part in one great spectacle, dwelling on the image each word generated, yet demanded they all occur together. They overlap, distort each other's sound, battle for the spectator's attention, yet they conjure an emotive response not just from the actors, but from everyone in the theatre-space. In other words, the whole room undergoes a process of labor; the whole spectacle is an exercise of physicality.

To see his theory in practice, we can look at a 1928 stage adaptation of *La Sonate des Spectres (1907)*, another Strindberg play, where Artaud remarked that he wanted to create a "harmony of gesture and movement […] controlled and regulated as in a well-oiled machine."[87] As one actor observed during the first rehearsal for *A Dream Play:* "Artaud rolled around on the stage, assumed a falsetto voice, contorted himself, howled, and fought against logic, order, and the 'well-made' approach […] He sought desperately to translate the 'truth' of the text, and not the words."[88] In other words, the "truth" only revealed itself after a feat of physical endurance.

Compare this to the project of Berezil: as Kurbas noted at the inception of his project, Berezil was "'not dogma ... but movement, and if it ever ceased to be so, it would contradict its name; it would cease existing."[89] Kurbas established the Berezil like a laboratory, attempting to redefine acting to focus more on the expression of a word (and how the meaning would be

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[86] Artaud. "Theatre of Cruelty." 245-246.
[87] I found this quote in the following: Morris, Blake. "The Théâtre Alfred Jarry," in *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader,* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 93. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429019838
[88] *Ibid.,* 94-95.
[89] I could not find the original quote. This fragment of Kurbas' Berezil manifesto was provided in Makaryk, Irena. *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 68.

manifest through body language). Furthermore, Kurbas' blending of theatricality with drama in his productions was reportedly very physical, as actors under the Berezil were expected to train in ballet, juggling, acrobatics, circus, and fencing to assist with their performance ability.[90]

Conclusion

It is without a doubt Antonin Artaud was familiar with Eastern European film and theatre: by the time he had co-founded the Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry, theatres from the Soviet Union already gained notoriety in Parisian culture, and artists around him increasingly used the platform of art to explore, support, or critique communist thought. Furthermore, Artaud's personal apoliticality allowed him to consume as much media as possible, which, in turn, gave him a stronger sense of familiarity with non-French art and aesthetics.

The similarities between Artaud and Les Kurbas cannot be ignored; in fact, when looking at both their theatre projects, which were active around the same time, we should consider them as contemporaries. The Berezil Theatre, like many Eastern European theatres that participated in the 1925 Exposition of Industrial and Modern Decorative Arts, had a lasting impact on French culture, and it would not be far-fetched to say that some of the ideas and theatrical innovations first explored by Les Kurbas in his studios influenced some aspects of Artaud's Théâtre d'Alfred Jarry. We must look at the history and legacy of the Berezil Theatre as a concrete example of the internationalism at the heart of the historical avant-garde. More importantly, the intellectual relationship between Kurbas and Artaud demonstrates how in-tune avant-garde artists were to the innovations across the continent, and how geographic and political difference made no impact on the exchange of ideas.

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[90] *Ibid.,* 69.

III. French Fascination with the *Ballet russes:* International Paris

"The [Ballet russes] had been launched which would transform stage production in Europe […]and give a new direction to the lives of a number of people throughout the world."
-Lydia Sokolova[91]

At the beginning of the 20th Century, political tensions within the city of Paris changed its attitude to be that of perpetual crisis. The "dangerous anarchists" of the outskirts were not to be trusted or promoted, yet the bourgeoisie living in the heart of Paris still clung onto the horse and buggy in a world where the car reigned supreme.[92] The innovative artists of the *fin de siècle* were not well-received by French art critics at all, so their work was given neither the proper financial backing nor the proper attention and excitement by the audience to continue development.[93] Lastly, the Age of Imperialism brought about with the Third Republic encouraged the French to look elsewhere for their resources—both economic and cultural—so interests in other cultures, albeit mostly with a colonialist edge, brought a whole slew of new artists to Paris, all while compromising the status of "national art."

Eastern European artists in Paris harbored a spirit particularly close to the French heart: revolution. These artists sought to go to France to experiment with their own revolution: a revolution against the czars, against the Imperial Theater, and against the stereotypes of "Russian backwardness." In a 1916 interview with the *New York Times,* Sergei Diaghilev admitted that his idea to bring the *Ballet russes,* his ballet company, to Paris came from the idea of bringing a new Russian art, rejecting previous aesthetics and conventions, to the international stage.[94] In this way, artists like Diaghilev saw Paris as more than a national capital; it became a laboratory for

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[91] Sokolova, Lydia. *Dancing for Diaghilev: The Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1989). *7.* https://archive.org/details/dancingfordiaghi0000soko_z1f8/page/6/mode/2up
[92] Eksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring.* 44-50.
[93] "No school any longer, only a smattering of talent; no group any longer, only individuals." Rocheblave, Samuel. *Le Goût en France* (Paris, 1914), 323-328. Cited and translated by the author in Esksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring*, 48.
[94] Eksteins. *Rites of Spring.* 53.

international artistic development. Eastern European artists also imported elements Weimar culture at the beginning of the 20th Century, looking to industrial Berlin as the symbol of theatricality, decadence, and modernity—a stark opposite to the people attempting to perpetuate the last embers of the dying *belle époque*.[95] Modernity was coming to France, yet most of its pioneers were anything but French.

In this chapter, I will be taking a closer look at the strong relationship between the dancers and artists of Diaghilev's *Ballet russes* and French critics and collaborators during the early period of the historical avant-garde (1910s-20s). Namely, I argue that, because of the *Ballet russe,* the role of Paris in European thought shifted from a paragon of French culture to an international city harboring a diverse cast of experimental artists. Furthermore, this cultural shift became crucial to understanding the development of the historical avant-garde: as we see in this specific case, the *Ballet russes* fostered a community—not just of dancers, but of producers, writers, and artists as well—of people from all parts of Europe, coming together to revolutionize and create a new, international dance aesthetic.

The Fantastical Ballet russes

On May 29, 1913, at the recently built Théâtre des Champs Élysées, famous French director, artist, and writer Jean Cocteau attended the first performance of *Rite of Spring.* When recounting the spectacle (and subsequent riot) he witnessed that night in 1918, Cocteau wrote:

> "I do not for a moment think that the "Sacre" would have met with a more polite reception on a less pretentious stage; but this luxurious theatre seemed, at first glance, symbolic of the misunderstanding which was confronting a decadent public with a work full of strength and youth. A tired public, reposing amidst Louis XVI garlands […] and cushions

[95] Homans, Jennifer. *Mr. B: George Balanchine's 20th Century* (New York: Random House, 2022). 102.

> of an orientalism for which the "Russian Ballet" must be held responsible. Under such conditions, […] the really New is driven away like a fly; it is disturbing."[96]

Cocteau was particularly cognizant of the dissonance between bourgeois Paris and the revolutionary ballet company. He remarked that the French audience was not prepared for the spectacle about to grace the stage: he partly blamed the riot that broke out on the fact that the "tasteless" Parisians entered the theatre with the false idea the ballet would depict an orientalist vision Russia associated with French excitement for all things "primitive." Seat prices were doubled, and the theatre was packed with people all expecting to be "transported" to a world reminiscent of Matisse's *Joy of Life*: "pure" and "atemporal", as well as "exotic." A pagan ritual ending in the blood sacrifice of a young virgin to celebrate the advent of spring seemed to have enough emphasis on natural mysticism to convince the imperial French that they would experience a night of whimsical exotica. However, they did not expect the complete revolution of dance, music, and theatricality; they were not prepared for the amorality of the piece, which seemed to compare the act of love to the act of violence and celebrate their similarities.

Rite of Spring had been the subject of many debates about "modern ballet," as well as the ability to use art to create a revolutionary, personal experience of life. Questions of internationalism, especially on the eve of the Great War, pushed intellectuals and the dancers themselves to figure out their own identities. One scathing French review of *Rite of Spring* condemned it precisely for its "Russianness." Appearing on the front pages of *Le Figaro*, the new ballet became yet again the emblem of Eastern European differentness from the French. "It seems that [the *Ballet russes*] are not at all aware of the customs and practices of the country they are imposing on," wrote Alfred Capus for *Le Figaro's* coverage of the performance on June 2,

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[96] This quotation comes from a 1921 English translation of Cocteau's original 1918 reflection. Cocteau, Jean. *Cock and Harlequin: Notes Concerning Music,* trans. Rollo H. Myers (London: Egoist Press, 1921). 44. https://archive.org/details/CockAndHarlequin/page/n23/mode/2up

1913.[97] Capus expressed genuine hatred of the presence of another culture in Parisian art circles, simultaneously disregarding the fact that the *Ballet russes* had never actually performed together in Russia. He found the *Ballet russes* to be the antithesis of France: too foreign, too absurd. However, what did this mean to the *Ballet russes,* a group of dancers that, throughout their tenure in Paris, attracted members from all over the world yet appeared "too Russian"? Were they speaking on behalf of Russia when they performed, despite neither performing in Russia nor, in most cases for the dancers, identifying *as* a Russian?

The *Ballet russes* itself had complex sense of identity and should be regarded as an international company. The sensation of this ballet derived, in part, from Sergei Diaghilev's creative ambitions, as well as the work environment he created as impresario. Diaghilev initially wanted to use the *Ballet russes* to demonstrate the modernity and creative excellence of Russia. He actively sought "Russian" dancers—it would be more accurate to say that he preferred ballerinas who had danced for one of the Russian ballets rather than dancers who identified as Russian—to join the company.[98] And, if the dancers he hired came from elsewhere—Poland, Ukraine, the United States, Italy, or England, or example—he would change their stage names to appear more Russian.[99] Diaghilev, raised in the Russian bourgeoisie of its czarist days, became enthralled by the idea of a Slavic past: Byzantine icons, Orthodox relics and religious symbols, the myth of the Scythians and provincial folklore—his Russia was a modern retelling of a primitive myth. Yet, he also offered his Parisian audiences oppressed fantasies—worlds where

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[97] Translated by author. Capus, Alfred. "Courrier de Paris." *Le Figaro.* June 2, 1913. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k289968p

[98] The Nijinsky siblings, for instance, were born in Kyiv and later wrote extensively about their Ukrainian identity, but they were trained in the Imperial Theatre and lived in St. Petersburg at the time they were hired. Homans, *Mr.B.,* 115.

[99] A famous example is the changing of one British dancer's name, "Hilda Tansley Munnings," to "Lydia Sokolova" to uphold the Russian aesthetic in Diaghilev's company. Sokolova also recounted the changing of Hilda Boot's name to "Bustova." Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev.* 8.

orientalism, sex between all kinds of people, bodies, violence and pleasure possessed the characters—that affirmed their own prejudices of the East, further gaining more success for his company. There were many instances where costumes for dancers were directly inspired by Japanese, Indian, and African art (through racist lens, undoubtedly), and ballets like *Le Dieu Bleu (1912)* were blatant showcases of Diaghilev's own orientalism.

Figure 3.1: The program book for the Ballet russes, *featuring costumes for* Le Dieu Bleu.[100]

The costumes in *Le Dieu Bleu*, the poses, and the set designs directly appropriated South Asian culture. Furthermore, the dancers' skins were painted to look darker, matching the "primitive mysticism" that underlay the premise of the one-act performance. The Ballet *russes* leaned fully into a fantasy to gain popularity with French audiences: because the French demonstrated anxieties about sex, non-European cultures, and their own lull in industrial modernity, they projected their innate desires onto the international ballet company.

Overt male sexuality was prominent in the *Ballet russes,* in both company culture and in the dances themselves, and very modern. Diaghilev never hid his homosexuality, nor his idealization of the male body in the ballets he produced. At the peak of the *Ballet russes'* tenure

[100] *7ème Saison des Ballets russes,* 1912. Concert program, 13 pages, s.n., s.d. Digital manuscript. Library of Congress, Music Division. https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200181872/

in Paris, the roles of artistic director and principal male dancer almost depended completely on his sexual relationships with the men of the company. To the dancers, Diaghilev's promotion of Vaslav Nijinsky from principal male dancer to artistic director came with no surprise. According to Lydia Sokolova's memoir, the two were practically inseparable since the day Nijinsky joined the company, and all the dancers knew that they were intense lovers with an incredible sense of collaboration.[101] Nijinsky's departure from the company, therefore, and Diaghilev's decision to replace him with Fokine (the previous artistic director) happened mainly because Nijinsky, unaccompanied by his lover for the first time, had quickly fallen in love with Romola de Pulszka and married her on the 1913 South America tour. Diaghilev refused to attend the wedding, angering Nijinsky, and then fired the dancer for a 'lack of cooperation' with the company's orders.[102]

The sexualized male body in the dances also became a prominent fixation in Parisian art criticism, bringing an otherwise repressed fantasy to the forefront of cultural discourse of the time. *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune (1912),* one of Nijinsky's first choregraphed one-act ballets, gained much attention (and much hatred) from the French press for its subject matter—a humanoid, mythological fawn (Nijinsky) lusts after a nymph and proceeds to have sex with her scarf on stage—and expressive choreography. Gaston Calmette critiqued in *Le Figaro* that the ballet showed a "lecherous fawn whose movements are vile, beastly, and erotic, and whose gestures are as crude as they are indecent," and that the piece "welcomed the booing it

[101] Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev.* 48.
[102] According to Sokolova, Nijinsky did not show up to an event in Rio de Janeiro, which was apparently neglecting orders, violating the dancer's contract with the company. However, she implied that he discovered that Diaghilev was not actually paying him a real salary, so that was a complete violation of the contract. Nijinsky's refusal to go to the Rio event was the reason provided on the telegraph for his firing, but Sokolova implied that the dancers knew that his marriage became his downfall. Sokolova. *Dancing with Diaghilev.* 49-50.

deserved."[103] Calmette, notably, had no problem with the music, composed by Claude Debussy, nor the libretto, an adaptation by Jean Cocteau of the poet Mallarmé's original eclogue. The problem for the conservative writer was the overt sexuality: the modern concept of showcasing repressed feelings had become too much for the conservative French bourgeois.

Diversity of the Company

From Diaghilev's point of view, the *Ballet russes* served a purely fantastical role in French culture. They were a symbol of a primitive Russia, of playful exoticism and sexual fantasy, and their revolution in the ballet world allowed "Russia" to become an artistic beacon in Paris. However, the dancers of the company tell a much different story, and it was thanks to their choreography and intellectual backgrounds that truly made the company a blend of ideas that promoted internationalism. In the early period of the *Ballet russes'* history in Paris, several of the principal choreographers brought their own experiences with national identities to the studio. Michel Fokine, born in St. Petersburg and the first of the great choreographers, gained notoriety for his participation in the Warsaw Ballet, where he was credited for reviving Polish interest in developing ballet. There, he choreographed pieces often revolving around the theme of Polish pride, selecting Chopin compositions and acclaimed Polish literature to reenact on stage.[104] He shared Diaghilev's interests in national folklore, as his performances for Polish audiences were often set in ancient times and had dancers perform in Grecian tunic-inspired costumes, but his dance technique was particularly modern, emphasizing a softness and fluidity to each movement that heavily contrasted with Eastern European stiffness trained through the Imperial Theatre.[105]

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[103] Translated by author. Calmette, Gaston. "Un faux pas." *Le Figaro,* May 30, 1912. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k289598g

[104] Pudełek, Janina. "Fokine in Warsaw, 1908-1914." *Dance Chronicle* 15, no. 1 (1992): 59–71. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567792.

[105] An American dancer, Margaret Severn, later shared this interpretation of Fokine's technique in her memoir several times. Severn was a dancer in Nijinska's company in the 1930s before joining Balanchine's New York City

Bronislava Nijinska was an active participant in transforming the Ukrainian art world during her time in the *Ballet russes.* Nijinska's pieces tended to reflect, either through the expression of movements or subject matter of the ballet, a distinct Ukrainian perspective of Eastern European life, politics, and culture. First, her development of her technique—extreme rigidity of the limbs, downward striking movements, intense emphasis on group work, and geometric group formations—originated from the emerging art scene in Ukraine. Take, for instance, the name of her dance studio: the idea of a "school of movement", of abstracting the body's forms into its most essential properties (line and movement), first appeared in art theories of renowned Ukrainian artist, Kazimir Malevich. In his 1915 essay, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," Malevich argued that color and texture were the "essence of painting," but representational art had "killed" that essence. A return to the fundamentals of art, of using color and line to express emotions, art could become itself again—more human.[106] In her memoir, Nijinska wrote something incredibly similar: "If we value an artist's creativity and expression, then [colors and feeling] are the only things I want to see in a picture. I want to approach a picture and see only a symphony of colors."[107] This demonstrated her keenness of the Ukrainian avant-garde, even when she was residing anywhere from Paris, to Berlin, to Moscow, to New York City. However, the relationship she had with the Kyiv art scene and culture was not only intellectual, but also literal. She was in direct contact with artists famous in Kyiv; Vadym Meller and Alexandra Exter designed several costumes and set designs for both the *Ballet russes* and

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Ballet. Severn, Margaret. "Dancing with Bronislava Nijinska and Ida Rubinstein," *Dance Chronicle* 11, no. 3 (1988): 333–64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567661.

[106] Malevich, Kazimir. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism." In *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934,* ed. And trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: Viking Press, 1976). 123.

[107] I could not find Nijinska's memoirs. This excerpt was translated and reprinted in: Garafola, Lynn. "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde: Bronislava Nijinska in Revolutionary Russia." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 29, no. 2 (2011): 121. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41428397.

Nijinska's proper productions, both taking inspiration from Ukrainian cultural textiles and fabrics to give her pieces a folksier appearance.[108] Moreover, alongside Ukrainian Jewish ballerina Ida Rubenstein, Nijinska frequently collaborated with the *Kultur-Liege* (a network of Jewish artists and intellectuals across Europe yet most active in the East) and hired many Jewish artists, composers, and set and costume designers to assist with her new pieces.[109]

For George Balanchine, another dancer in the *Ballet russes,* the notion of being associated with Russia was particularly offensive, due to his personal trauma and overt disdain for the communist government. Balanchine, *né* Georgi Balanchivadze, was born in St. Petersburg to a Georgian father and Russian mother. Georgian culture, music, and dance framed his childhood, and he tended to introduce himself, and later consider himself, to be fully Georgian.[110] Furthermore, his Imperial training took him to Weimar Berlin prior to joining the *Ballet russes,* exposing him to a world where theatricality, decadence, and total liberation reigned supreme. His choreographic influences began in Berlin, developed in Paris, and then transformed into his own ballet company in the United States, the New York City Ballet. Lastly, though his name remained "Georgi Balanchivadze" while he danced for Diaghilev, he became one of the first former dancers to Westernize his name, mixing both an English first name with a French-sounding last name to merge the two countries he spent the most time in as a professional. In Balanchine's case, the *Ballet russes* was not Russian all.

So, the *Ballet russes* was not only an experiment for reinventing ballet, but also a magnet for all sorts of international collaboration. And while most of the dancers came from all over Eastern Europe and were a part of the Russian Imperial Theatre network, their personal tastes

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[108] For more information about Vadym Meller's designs for her ballets, read: Skhandrij. "Vadym Meller and Sources of Inspiration in Theater Art" in *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine.* 116-135.
[109] Garafola. "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde." 123.
[110] *Homans, Mr. B. 5.*

and approaches to art all brought together various cultures under a studio that attempted to create a new world. By the time the *Ballet russes* ended its Parisian residency, they had introduced elements of Weimar culture, the Ukrainian avant-garde, Georgian music and dance, Russian orientalism, and more to France—the new ballet, in Diaghilev's vision, would be the culmination of all European civilization.

"Jeune homme fou de danse": Vaslav Nijinsky[111]

Notably, in almost every review of a *Ballet Russe* performance before they left Paris, one dancer never seemed to get much criticism for his performances: Vaslav Nijinsky.[112] Nijinsky, under the *Ballet russes*, had choreographed and starred in multiple performances, including *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune (1912), Jeux (1913),* and *Rite of Spring (1913).* As a professional dancer, Nijinsky became a representation of the "international," transcending his Eastern European identity that otherwise would have received much scrutiny by the French. His massive success across the continent not only introduced him to some of the historical avant-garde's most innovative artists but also introduced to the world his *own* point of view as an experimental artist. Furthermore, Nijinsky inspired many dancers and artists to work for the *Ballet russes,* demonstrating that he also is a strong example of an artist that brought people from all over the world together to create art.

Born in Kyiv around 1889 to two Polish dancers, Vaslav Nijinsky immigrated to St. Petersburg in the early 1900s to train with the Imperial Theatre. Since the reign of Peter the Great, ballet was used as a tool to both present Russia as a beacon of European civilization and

[111] "The crazy young man of dance"
[112] In the same 1913 *Le Figaro* review where he complained endlessly about the 1913 debut of *Rite of Spring*, Alfred Capus said the following of Nijinsky: "Nijinsky would have to agree not to stage any more ballets that aspire to a level of beauty inaccessible to our feeble minds […] In return for these concessions we would continue to assure him that he is the greatest dancer in the world, the most handsome of men, and we would prove this to him." Capus, "Courrier de Paris."

control the serf population. The royal court created the institution of "Serf ballerinas" so that serf children could receive formal education and professional training for the sole purpose of entertaining the court. By the time Nijinsky and the 20th-Century generation of dancers began their education, serfdom had formally ended, but the structure holding the Imperial Theatre still was under the power of generations of serf-owners, demonstrating little political change underlying Russian culture. Furthermore, the ballet was one of the only opportunities for peasant and working-class families to give their children a formal education: if they were self-disciplined enough at a young age, they could secure a job and a great education at no expense. At the time of Nijinsky's formal training, the Russian empire was on the verge of total collapse, yet they needed to retain one of their remaining symbols of opulence and high society.[113] Thus, when Diaghilev had requested some dancers to begin his new enterprise to 'bring Russia to the world', the Imperial Theatre readily gave him some of their most promising students. Among them, Nijinsky, his sister Bronislava Nijinska, Michel Fokine, and Ida Rubenstein were part of Diaghilev's original corps.

However, as the dancers mentioned above would prove, the formal Russian training of the Imperial Theatre would be overridden completely by a ballet technique that, at least to the French audiences, resembled a primitivist reimagining of the classic form of dance. Nijinsky certainly excelled at innovation and skill. One French reviewer of his performance and choreography for *Scheherazade (1912)* praised Nijinsky as one of the "great creators of every art," and that the "harmony of Nijinsky is his whole being, not just in the expression of his face, which matters less than the blossoming of dance that shoots out of his noble thighs."[114] Nijinsky

[113] Homans, *Mr. B.* 38-41.
[114] Translated by author. Nazzi, Louis. "Nijinsky, jeune homme fou de danse." *Les Hommes du Jour*, January 1912. 7. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bd6t51026857

became this symbol of both the natural and the divine. The review likened his movements to that of blossoming, drawing parallels between the graceful energy of his dancing to his elegant and handsome demeanor. Notably, this review of the Eastern European dancer also carried a fauvist tone, equating excellent technique to a fundamental essence of the Earth; or, in other words, a childlike "pureness" derived solely from his relationship to the Earth. Another 1918 French review of Nijinsky's repertoire illustrated the same praise, stating the following:

> "The art of Nijinsky […] is the pulsation of the body emanating from the Earth, still convulsive and shocking, yet natural. It is life in living rhythm […] It is a traditional art that returns to that of the first human beings […] but also a revolution of dance, which was left inane in the previous centuries and immobilized in its artifice of pure virtuosity. Dance has become human again."[115]

This reviewer, in focusing on Nijinsky's connection with the Earth and the first civilizations, described the dancer like a fauvist painting come to life. The idea of being purely human—of restoring dance to its ancient glory—ironically transformed him into a mystical being, someone who had become life itself through his gestures.

Almost every dancer who joined the *Ballet russes* dedicated at least one chapter of their memoirs to Vaslav Nijinsky, crediting him as the reason they wanted to travel to Paris in the first place. Lydia Sokolova, an English expatriate, for instance, dedicated 19 pages to the Ukrainian dancer, who she danced alongside from 1913 to his quitting in 1917. She called Nijinsky the "greatest living male dancer," and that he "seemed to exist on a different plane."[116] She, like many others, seemed to regard him as an impossible eccentric—his choreography had its own timing only sensical to himself, and his positions and technique differed so greatly from that of traditional ballet that some of his favorite dancers were those who did not come from a classical

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[115] Translated by author. Morin, Léo-pol. "Igor Stravinsky et la Musique Russe" *Le Nigog,* 1, no.7. (July 7, 1918): 233. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6557663j

[116] Sokolova, *Dancing with Diaghilev,* 37-38.

background. Most importantly, Nijinsky, according to Sokolova, was the principal reason for the *Ballet russes'* success: while his choreography may not have been the most comprehensible, his dancing excited people, motivated them to want to join his magical world of dance. In her reflection about Nijinsky's performance in *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune,* she wrote: "After watching the *Faune* in performance, I could hardly wait to have another try at dancing in it […] [The music and rhythm] had to trickle through your consciousness, and the sensation approached the divine […] It was most ingeniously thought out."[117] Nijinsky had the power to attract many new artists to Paris, sometimes for the first time in their careers. He can, then, be considered yet another good example of how the historical avant-garde fueled international communication.

Collaboration with French Artists

The *Ballet russes* brought together not only dancers but also artists, writers, and musicians from across the continent to work in Paris, producing some of the most innovative art in almost every medium. Jean Cocteau, for instance, had a long-lasting friendship with Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Léonoide Massine, and Igor Stravinsky, and he wrote the librettos for many of their productions. Cocteau first engaged with the *Ballet russes* in 1910 after attending a performance of "The Spectre of the Rose," where Vaslav Nijinsky had the principal solo. Cocteau was immediately enraptured by the dancer; in *Cock and Harlequin*, Cocteau wrote of Nijinsky:

> "Instead of going to see the piece, I went to wait for him in the wings. *There it was really very good* […] I shall always hear that thunder of applause; I shall always see that young man, smeared with grease-paint, gasping and sweating, pressing his heart with one hand and holding on with the other to the scenery, or else fainting on a chair."[118]

[117] Sokolova*, Dancing with Diaghilev.,* 40.
[118] Cocteau. *Cock and Harlequin.* 42.

For Cocteau, this encounter with Nijinsky felt like an encounter with the divine; the unforgettable evening, furthermore, introduced the French artist to one of the most important people in his life: Igor Stravinsky.

Prior to working directly with Stravinsky, Cocteau offered to write librettos for Diaghilev's productions, demonstrating from an early stage in the historical avant-garde the enthusiastic desire artists had for international collaborations. In 1912, Cocteau wrote the libretto for *Le Dieu Bleu*—a play about human sexuality and desire told through an appropriation of Hindu mythology—and collaborated Russian Jewish painter, Léon Bakst.[119] A year later, in a car ride with Diaghilev, Nijinsky, and Stravinsky after the debut of *Rite of Spring,* Cocteau met the Russian composer, and attributed this encounter for the inspiration for his next original libretto, *David.* That ballet would never come to fruition—in Cocteau's eyes, the play was underdeveloped and too complicated with religion, and Stravinsky allegedly hated the draft the French writer sent him—but it would later be reworked into Cocteau's first collaborative *magnum opus: Parade.*[120]

Parade (1917), a one-act ballet about different groups of acrobats trying to lure the audience to watch their performance, was the epitome of avant-garde internationalism. Cocteau wrote the libretto, Léonoide Massine (a Russian) choreographed the piece, Erik Satie composed the music, and Pablo Picasso (another avid fan of the *Ballet russes*) designed the sets and costumes. "I think of those admirable months during which Satie, Picasso and I lovingly invented, sketched and gradually put together this little work," wrote Cocteau in 1918, enthusiastically reflecting on his collaborations with them. Cocteau attributed his inspiration for this play from listening to Satie's music in 1915; after they met, Cocteau added, "A kind of

[119] *7ème Saison des Ballets russes.*
[120] Cocteau. *Cock and Harlequin.* 50-51.

telepathy inspired us simultaneously with a desire to collaborate." According to his reflection, each of the artists took charge of a certain element of the performance, but they would regularly meet to exchange ideas to see how they could accomplish each other's visions.[121] Each artist involved in a production had complete creative control over his work, demonstrating that the *Ballet russes* was willing to incorporate a slew of unique artistic preferences in each production. According to a contract between Henri Matisse, who was asked to design sets and costumes for the 1919 production of *Le Chant du Rossignol,* and Sergei Diaghilev, who would provide the funding, Matisse was given full creative control over the designs and execution of his set pieces and costumes.[122] Thus, even in the non-dancing aspect of the production, evidence of personal accounts, librettos, and contracts enumerating the terms and conditions, the *Ballet russes* cultivated a highly collaborative work environment for artists of all backgrounds and specialties. In this case, the *Ballet russes* became an international workshop.

Conclusion

Throughout its residency in Paris, the *Ballet russes* encouraged not only the building of an expansive network of French and Eastern European artists who collaborated on large-scale performing arts pieces together. Nor did it only encourage migration from different parts of Europe and the Americas to dance with renowned figures like Nijinsky. The *Ballet russes* changed the role of Paris altogether: no longer a symbol of French excellence, Paris during the historical avant-garde became one of the many central hubs for international cultural exchange, and the creators producing some of the most innovative works in the city considered themselves not a part of any nation-state, but of the world.

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[121] *Ibid*., 53-57.
[122] Matisse, Henri. *Contract with Diaghile[v] for "Le Chant du Rossignol*." Signed September 13, 1919. Contract, digital copy of manuscript. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b525148951?rk=21459;2

Conclusion: Revisiting the "International Word"

A year after the Cabaret Voltaire and the Dada Manifesto, Hugo Ball gave a lecture at the Galerie Dada in Zürich. There, Ball described who he thought to be an ideal modern artist—someone, a "purifier of life," who represented "liberation, solace, redemption, and peace" in a time of cultural decay.[123] His subject: Wassily Kandinsky, Ball's friend and frequenter of the Cabaret Voltaire.

It is clear from the 1917 lecture that Ball considered Kandinsky to be one of his greatest inspirations, as well as an artist deserving of international praise. For instance, Ball's idea of the "international word," seems to have been directly inspired by Kandinsky's idea of "inner necessity", as he explained:

> "This […] 'inner necessity,' is the one and only ultimate creative principle that Kandinsky recognizes. […] On inner necessity everything ultimately depends: it distributes the colors, forms, and emphases, it bears responsibility even for the most daring experiment. It alone is the answer to the meaning and primal basis of the image. […] It is the ultimate gateway that the artist, in his assault, cannot break down."[124]

Kandinsky's "inner necessity," at least according to Ball, is his individuality, which has been inevitably influenced by his cultural upbringing. In other words, Kandinsky's color selection, pictures used to distort, song choice for his music paintings, and subjects for poetry cannot be separated by his "Russianness." "Russia in its multitude of colors," Ball wrote, "is present in his works as in no other painter's."[125] Yet the freedom Ball recognized in his work, this idea that the personal life of Kandinsky could be imbued in his abstract forms, liberated all people, and his radical individuality united the people "from Japan to Greenland."[126] It comes as no surprise that, after his own interaction and collaboration with artists from different parts of Europe (Ball and

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[123] Ball, Hugo. "Kandinsky," trans. Christopher Middleton, April 17, 1917. In *A Flight Out of Time,* 226.
[124] *Ibid.,* 227.
[125] *Ibid.,* 228.
[126] *Ibid.*

Kandinsky became friends in 1912), Hugo Ball recognized modernism as an international art movement. More importantly, we can see how his friendship and admiration for Kandinsky, regardless of his nationality or political beliefs, became vital to Ball's own conclusions of how a new world revolving around art, as well as the future of the historical avant-garde.

Now we can clearly see how this story of Hugo Ball and the historical avant-garde truly expands our understanding of European identity during the interwar period. Namely, we can see that the numerous examples of artists of different origins who travelled across Europe and created spaces for international artistic collaboration further dismantles this narrative of a "divided Europe." On the contrary, European cultural identity depended on this optimism practiced by avant-garde artists: through their innovative projects, they genuinely believed Europe could be a borderless continent.

In the first chapter, I explored the international origins of the avant-garde, tracing the development of several artistic movements through the lens of intellectual and social interaction among artists across Europe. Beginning in 1893 with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, I traced the influences of his theories and theatrical style in the works of his successors, all of which came from different parts of Europe and pioneered their proper artistic movements. I then examined the movements of futurism, beginning in 1908 Milan with Filippo Marinetti, and neo-primitivism, David Burliuk's 1910 Ukrainian response to fauvism, to argue that the historical avant-garde was built on the foundation of a highly collaborative network of artists. More importantly, I asserted that the common thread between all these founding movements that developed into the historical avant-garde was the idea of internationalism, or the belief that artists could forge a new, egalitarian society devoid of politics through their art.

In chapter 2, I compared the histories of Les Kurbas, a Ukrainian director and playwright, and Antonin Artaud, his French counterpart. More specifically, by providing a deeper history of Les Kurbas' theater in both Ukraine and Paris, then connecting the similarities between the theories and practices of Kurbas and Artaud, I argued that the worlds of these two people are more connected than previously thought. In my larger argument about the highly collaborative nature of the historical avant-garde, as well as its complex networks of artists across Europe, I demonstrated that, in the ten years of activity for Kurbas and Artaud, both seemed to have overcome both Western and Russian ideas of one Soviet culture, and that communism as the end goal of using art to change life had not been a viable solution. Kurbas and Artaud, in their decisions to import theatre and film from across the continent to their theatre spaces, exemplified this internationalist spirit at the heart of the avant-garde: they were willing to look towards one another for inspiration, and their own survival as artists depended on attempting to make one, 'European' art.

In the third chapter, I argued that, during the historical avant-garde, the presence of Eastern European artists in Paris effectively transformed the role of the city from the expected "pioneer" of national culture to a hub for innovative, international art. By looking at Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballet* russes, a successful ballet company comprised of dancers from all over Europe (but primarily from Russia and Ukraine), I analyzed their reception in Parisian audiences, their influences and active involvement in the fauvist movement, and their own encouragement for artists to flock to Paris to witness their unique dance style and dancers. Lastly, the *Ballet russes'* active engagement with influential French modernists—Cocteau, Picasso, and Matisse—demonstrated how important personal touch was to each production, and how Diaghilev's

company cultivated a highly collaborative work environment for artists of all backgrounds and specialties.

As I have shown, the historical avant-garde challenges the myth that Europe had been socially, politically, and culturally in ruins. It is this impressive clinging to internationalism that kept the European art scene alive, even in its most dire times. So, Hugo Ball's "international word" had been found. In every brushstroke, every letter, every dance move, every line of dialogue, the artists of the historical avant-garde created a world where art could eliminate any national, ethnic, social, or political divisions. They maintained the survival of the European cultural identity.

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