

Preface: Cultural Modernism III: The French and Italian Avant-Garde, October 23-24, 2014

Before the end of the 19th century, the term *avant-garde* designated, in the French language, the vanguard of an army or political movement. The term carried, therefore, violent or at least aggressive nuances: whoever belonged to the avant-garde would be among the first to fight the enemy on the battlefield or in the political arena. It is only at the beginning of the 20th century that Avant-Garde became synonymous with the group of groundbreaking artists, writers, and intellectuals who came to Paris from all corners of Europe and the Americas. Despite their different cultures, these poets, painters, and filmmakers often worked together, mixing languages and art forms. Many avant-garde artists shared both their arts and their lives, creating a vibrant cosmopolitan community based upon unconventional individualism and contempt for decrepit artistic stereotypes and petty bourgeois morality. *Cultural Modernism III* celebrates this community, its longstanding influence, and its transnational collaborations, particularly but not exclusively between France and Italy.

Exploring languages (French, Italian, English, Spanish, German, and many others) is arguably the best way to approach the Avant-Garde. The latter aims at breaking the accepted conventions of space and time, and yet language—be it verbal or visual—is based in time and space. Henceforth: contemporary visual artists Rattner and Warren show the influence of the Avant-Garde on their productions; Sharpley-Whiting analyzes the works and the contradictions of the Chinese-Congolese-Cuban Paris-based painter Wifredo Lam, divided between his native Cuba and the Parisian artistic circles of Breton, Césaire, and Picasso; Barsky stresses the still largely unexplored connections and aesthetic exchanges between the Parisian Avant-Garde and the American Beat Generation; Luisetti investigates the complex artistic production of the Italian photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia, whose Photodynamism at once expands Bergson's philosophy, critically employs Futurist aesthetics, and anticipates contemporary experiments in pictorial and film practices; Wild situates the moral and artistic revolution of the Avant-Garde in the context of the burgeoning 'new' art of film, as the enthusiasm and the anxiety it creates is faithfully reflected in the cinema journals of the time; and finally, Livorni's Freudian close reading of Apollinaire and Ungaretti, both bilingual (French and Italian) soldier-poets, helps us better understand the enormous tragedy of WWI, an event that in many ways ended the Avant-Garde era and started its 'museification.'

Tellingly, some hundred years after the catastrophic events of the Great War and the sunset of the Parisian Avant-Garde, Europe still faces epic challenges. Our hope is that *Cultural Modernism III* might evoke a relatively brief but immensely important moment in a not-so-distant past in which nationalities, cultures, and languages reached a fragile but vital and joyful balance. Consequently, the essays presented here might offer some insights for dealing with the uncertainties of the present, in which—in a way that becomes even more striking when compared to the Avant-Garde period—old habits and conventions, old borders and divisions seem to be rapidly fading.