

Book Review:

April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo

Maureen Boulanger

In *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo* (2018), Irena R. Makaryk focuses on neglected aspects of the influential 1925 Paris Exposition internationale des arts decoratifs et industriels modernes, providing an examination of theatre and the theatrical arts and the participation of the Soviet Union. The author, a professor of English at the University of Ottawa who has written extensively on theatre and modernism, examines the Paris exhibition's attempt to articulate modernism or synthesize a modernist style throughout the fair, focusing on theatrical displays, the dominance of the USSR in articulating a modernist theatre, and the success or failure of modernist theatre to establish itself in the years after the fair.

The introduction provides an overview of the Paris Exposition, articulates the author's focus and theoretical approach, provides a summary of the origins and important features of world's fairs, and highlights the similarities between fairs and theatre. Makaryk modernism identifies four unique aspects of the Paris expo: its focus on creating a specific style (modernism), the inclusion of theatre arts, the participation of the USSR, and the display of a "revolution [in] the conception of space" (4). Makaryk notes that while the Paris Expo has been extensively studied, there has been a lack of attention to theatre. Her specific examination of theatre relies on several theoretical underpinnings, such as theories of space that argue that the space of a performance, such as stage architecture, has meaning, political and social, and can be influential. Makaryk cites pioneers of theatrical space theory, such as Brander Matthews and Max Herrman, as well as the more contemporary Gay McCauley. The author also relies heavily on the theories of noted French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre in her examination of the reactions of the West to Soviet theatre, and how this affected the reception of theatrical modernism. She argues that scholars of theatrical space have largely ignored the importance of the Paris Expo, which she believes "was one of the seminal moments in the development of the study of space, especially of space's potential for radical uses, functions, and values" (7). Makaryk also hopes to "test" fashion theory as it applies to the creation, dissemination and acceptance of modernist style. For this she relies mainly on the work of George Sproule and his "stages of fashion diffusion" (10).

The chapters of the book are organized thematically to highlight the author's focus on spaces. Chapter one looks at the city of Paris as it prepared for the fair and the aims of fair organizers, as well as the USSR, as it transformed itself in the post-revolutionary period, and how modernism was performed within these spaces. As the 1925 exhibition was located within central Paris, Makaryk sees the city itself as a stage or backdrop for the fair and stresses that essential elements of modernism were used to emphasize the city as theatre: the electrification of various structures and edifices, and the advertising of Citroen on the Eiffel tower. The author argues that the "insertion" of a fair devoted to the "the new" within a space already filled with "symbolic historic monuments" transformed the city, making it "simultaneously familiar, strange and new." She notes that the use of artificial lighting was not only a marker of technological progress, transforming the traditional spaces of city and giving it a feeling of a theatre, it also played with time, as day time spaces were enjoyed in the evenings. Thus traditional city spaces were re-conceptualized. In her examination of the USSR, the author examines how "urban space was deliberately reconfigured...to create the new society and turn its citizens into the proletariat (4). The throwing off of the old tsarist regime and the embracing of a new society played out in the "toppling" of old monuments, and the renaming of squares and streets.

The Paris Expo and modernism become the central foci in chapter two. The author discusses the beliefs of fair organizers and contemporary commentators that the fair "mark[ed] the dawn of a new age" of modernism, (56) and that a new creative style to match the "modern spirit" was needed. She also discusses the modernist spirit in various countries and within various disciplines. Makaryk argues that the main goal of the fair was to attempt to "give spatial 'voice' to a feeling that had been expressed by writers, artists, and creators throughout the past two decades of the twentieth century" that reflected "upheavals in economic, scientific realms" (59). Fair organizers, acknowledging France's slow response to modernism, hoped that France would reestablish itself as "a leader in all aesthetic categories" through the fair, focus on "the new" in the decorative arts (66). However, as the author notes, a lack of consensus on the value of decorative arts and a concern with the term "modern" plagued fair organizers from its conception. Such ambiguity, Makaryk argues, "compromised" the fair from the start and frustrated France's embrace of modernism, which led to theatrical displays and performances that relied on traditional types of spectacle. Makaryk also offers a potent example of French fair organizers' resistance or lack of agreement over what constituted a modern aesthetic: the obscuring of the Pavillon de L'esprit nouveau" by French modernist architect Le Corbusier.

The rationale for the USSR's participation in the fair is the focus of chapter 3. Makaryk argues that despite their bold, innovative theatrical displays, the Soviets walked a fine line between old and new Russia at the Paris Expo to avoid alienating western nations. The new

Russia still needed the trade and alliances of the old Russia to stabilize the economy and rebuild the country. However, the Soviets also recognized the propagandistic function of world's fairs. Architecture and theatrical displays offered the Soviets a chance to show western nations that Russia was leading the way in embracing the modern. Much of the debate centered on the Russian Pavilion by Konstantin Melnikov; it was modern in its lack of decoration, with strong geometric lines and reference to previous architectural styles, but some argued it was too violent a break with the past.

Chapter 4 focuses on the efforts of some members of the committee of the Arts du Theatre, known as Classe 25, to bring together theatre companies from around the world to create a new space that used innovations in stagecraft to create a "uniform modern style." Although a theatre building which embraced modernist principles, such as lack of ornamentation, variety of stage areas, variety of natural and electric lighting, was built by August Perreault, more traditional members of Classe 25 frustrated attempts to present modern performances. According to Makaryk, most performances were "commercial and amateurish," and rather than indicating France as a leader in a new modern approach to theatre, and displayed "France's excessive, nostalgic attachment to the past to tradition/infatuation with regionalism" (126).

While France failed in its attempt to lead a revolution in theatre, the USSR's most important and controversial contribution to the fair was their modern theatre arts exhibit. This is the focus of Chapter 5. The author relies on theories of space, notably those of Henri Lefebvre, to explore "the meanings and values expressed by the Soviet theatre arts display" and why reactions to the Soviet theatre were so divisive (136). She notes that critics understood that the Soviet "stage designs were ideological...and seemed to proclaim the harshness of the Soviet turn away from traditionalism and the embrace of industry and mechanization" (136). Critics were concerned that their theatre productions suggested more than just a revolution in theatre, but a "social revolution" (136). Some felt that Soviet theatre was a threat to French cultural traditions. One example cited by the author is the Soviets' radical re-interpretation of Racine's *Phaedra*.

In Chapter six the author moves from Paris to America as she examines reactions to the International Theatre Exposition in New York (1926), which included almost the entire display of foreign theatre from the Paris Expo in 1925. The author states that the New York Expo was hailed by a select group of more "radical" critics and artists, but Americans overall "were bewildered and unprepared for what they saw" (181). However, as the author points out the foreign theatre exhibit did result in much debate and discussion about the state of American theatre, and resulted in the creation of new theatre companies that "embraced experimentation along with left-wing political ideas" (189).

The final chapter reiterates the importance of the Paris Expo and elucidates the various

ways that modernism appeared after the fair - from the discussions and debates in scholarly circles to the "costume, sets, and interior lighting of Art Deco" in Hollywood, thus confirming world's fairs as an important "forum for disseminating new ideas" (196).

While Makaryk concludes that although France failed to fully embrace a modernist theatre at the Paris Expo, the fair was immensely important to the dissemination and acceptance of modernist art globally.

Makaryk's use of theory is both a strength and a weakness. The author is not heavy handed in her use of theory: she explains it clearly and applies it deftly. Spatial theory provides cohesion for the wide-reaching content - from Paris to the USSR to America - and elucidates how modernity was expressed in Paris and various cities of the Soviet Union. It also gives a deeper understanding of the important role that world's fairs play in providing a stage for larger debates in society, such as modernism, which is generally missing in materialist approaches common in histories of world's fairs. Makaryk highlights Henri Lefebvre's "trial by space" idea as a means to understand French critics' "anxieties about the representation of theatrical space." At the Paris Exposition, "a world stage," "ideologies and concepts of society were fundamentally put into question by their very different representations, uses, and concepts of space" (140). Ideological use of space is clearly expressed in the discussion of Soviet cities. The author's examination of "[f]estivals and mass spectacles," such as the reenactment of The Storming of the Winter Palace in the streets of Petrograd - a total theatre that used the city as backdrop - emphasizes the "reconfigur[ation] of the past to privilege a triumphant revolutionary present."

The inclusion of fashion theory, which the author admits she is "testing" in the book, works against the cohesion of the text. She uses it to illuminate how and why a modernist aesthetic became accepted in various countries. The theory is best utilized in the discussion of modernist theatre in America to explain how it was introduced and embraced by cultural elites but was too revolutionary to take hold in the US, and only became "fashion" in the 1960s with a changes in demographics and the political climate. In fact, Chapter six, which focuses on modern theatre in American, feels like a separate work. While it is connected thematically, it deserves a separate, more expansive treatment.

Overall, *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo* is extremely well researched, informative, and very readable. The author relies on archival research in several countries, and secondary sources in several languages, including French and Russian. Scholars of theatre and/or modernism will find it of more value than those interested specifically in world's fairs. However, Makaryk's effort could help lead world's fairs scholars towards a more a theoretical approach.