

# A Center One Day, a Periphery Next: Shifting Configurations of the Czech Avant-garde

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Recent discussions about the interwar avant-garde repeatedly touch on the issue of center and periphery, especially as regards the relation between East and West. The overall direction of these studies suggests that the assumption of a configuration in which the West is central, hence dominating, is wrong. Instead, alternative models of structures should be fleshed out in which everyone is on a par, hence no asymmetries, no centers, no peripheries. An often-quoted proposal that points in this direction is Piotr Piotrowski's approach in which what is understood as the vertical model of the avant-garde – and modern art – is replaced by a horizontal model. Piotrowski opens his analysis as follows:

This vertical narrative implies a certain hierarchy. The heart of modern art is the center – a city or cities – where the paradigms of the main artistic trends came into being: Berlin, Paris, Vienna, London, New York. From those centers particular models come to the periphery, radiating all over the world. Put differently, from within certain nations those models are subsequently internationalized. Hence, the art of the center determines a specific paradigm, while the art of the periphery is supposed to adopt the models established in the centers. (Piotrowski 2009: 50f.)

Piotrowski is situating this process cautiously in presenting the insistence on the center and periphery as a matter of art history. While artists in real life are behaving in an unisono solidarity, “[i]t was only art history which developed the hierarchical, vertical discourse ordering the artistic geography in terms of centers and peripheries” (Piotrowski 2009: 51). This is, of course, a position that those of us who are not art historians may find discipline-internal, i.e., a case in which a discipline handles its own history, values, aims, and internal conflicts. Whether it is descriptively adequate on “the ground floor” is another matter.

While historians of the avant-garde have been drawing inspiration from this paradigm change and its subsequent discussion (see Jakubovska/Radomska 2022), there is obviously an elephant in the room – horizontal art history and similar approaches typically fail to be sufficiently nuanced since they are heavily driven by emancipatory perspective. Perhaps unavoidably so. Piotrowski was an exceptional connoisseur of art of communist Eastern Europe and had all reasons to perceive not only deformations prevalent during this period but also the ignorance of Western historiography, which significantly contributed to the emancipatory flavor of the horizontal model.

However, although “horizontalization” is in principle imaginable, we should not limit ourselves to a single guiding image. The present paper studies two cases which I argue bring a more nuanced angle on the subject in laying bare certain elementary

mechanisms characteristic of avant-garde behavior. Specifically, I first review the relationship of the Prague avant-garde group of *Devětsil* and its Brno counterpart of the 1920s, and then proceed to the relationship of Prague Surrealists to Paris Surrealists in the 1930s. I show that in both instances the role of center and periphery, was crucial. In both cases, essentially the same group of artists and literati attempted to actively implement a centralized role at one point in time, while consciously subordinating itself to a center at another time. The value of cases such as these consists in reminding ourselves that asymmetries in cultural institutions arise and change – or, perhaps better, arise to change – and that general rule of social interaction, which revolve around competition, creation of pecking orders, and other forms of hierarchical control, are present in the domain of culture as well. Naturally, as is common in studies of culture, alternative descriptions may be possible – the present proposal is merely driven by available data.

## LETTERS TO BRNO

Studies of the Czech avant-garde of the 1920s have by now a long tradition in both Czech and international scholarship. Special attention has been paid to the group called *Devětsil*, literally “nine powers,” which emerged in late 1920 in Prague.<sup>1</sup> While Prague was a visible capital of the new state, bringing a number of avant-garde authors, artists, and architects together, the Moravian capital Brno quickly developed a significant avant-garde culture of its own too. In fact, Brno was in many ways more enterprising than Prague. This showed, among other things, its ability to launch an avant-garde magazine *Pásmo* (1924–1926), which functioned for much of its existence as the *Devětsil*’s central platform, thus playing an important role in the development of an avant-garde program called Poetism.<sup>2</sup> Prague and Brno were in a close contact as is documented precisely on the pages of *Pásmo* but also by the correspondence between the Prague avant-garde leader Karel Teige (1900–1951) and his confrère Artuš Černík (1900–1953), who moved from Prague to Brno and was active in Brno *Devětsil* for much of the 1920s and also acted as *Pásmo*’s co-editor.<sup>3</sup> The present section exploits this understudied correspondence.<sup>4</sup>

The launching of *Pásmo* prompted a warm reaction in Prague. Teige’s letter to Černík from January 8, 1924, voices cordial regards from the entire Prague *Devětsil* and wishes good luck to Prague’s Brno combatants – *Pásmo* is “very much needed”:

Milý Artuši,

dostal jsem *Pásmo*, které se mi velmi líbí a které se v Praze vůbec líbí. Mluvil jsem s Bartošem i s Götzem, oběma se moc líbí, Götz v neděli v “Samostatnosti” bude

1 English-language surveys and analyses range from Šmejkal and Švácha (1990) to Pomajzlová (2019); the latter includes an extensive primary and secondary bibliography covering literature, art, architecture, film, and other media.

2 On the role of the so-called “small” magazines in the Czech avant-garde see Forbes (2016), Toman (2019, 2021), and Wutsdorff (2019).

3 For monographic treatments of Teige in English, see Michalová (2018) and Zusi (in preparation); Černík is less known, but see his entry in the *Lexikon české literatury* (Vlašín 1985).

4 Specifically, I quote letters by Teige to Černík that are deposited in Černík papers in the Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Prague.

psát o Pásmu kladně a novém životě negativně. [...] Přejeme Pásmu mnoho zdaru, přejeme Vám i sobě aby pásmo vycházelo co nejčastěji, je ho velmi třeba, a pozdravujeme celou redakci.

Teige a ostatní.

(Teige to Černík, Jan. 8, 1924; spelling preserved; A. Černík papers, PNP Praha)

[Dear Artuš,

I got a copy of Pásmo that I really like and that we like in Prague overall. I talked to Bartoš and Götz, they both like it very much, Götz will write about Pásmo positively and about the New Life negatively on Sunday in "Independence". [...] We wish Pásmo a lot of success, we wish you and yourself that it will be published as often as possible, it is very much needed, and we greet the entire editorial board.

Teige and the others]

Although Prague Devětsil members were actively participating in *Pásmo*, Prague was gradually becoming critical. On June 2, 1925, Teige states to Černík unceremoniously that Prague needs to take over:

Moc se nadává na to že nemáme přes Pásmo vůbec kontrolu, a tak nemůžeme zabránit dále čtenějším hovadinám, v 10, 11-12 č.!! Zkrátka, Devětsil chce aby příštím ročníkem Pásmo bylo kontrolováno pražskou redakcí, a aby podstatně zvýšilo úroveň. Redakčně. Navrhuje se z pražského devětsilu abych vedoucím (rédacteur en chef) redaktorem pro tento ročník byl já, úřadujícím chefredaktorem, le géant, ty. (Teige to Černík, June 5, 1925; spelling preserved; A. Černík papers, PNP Praha)

[There is a lot of bad feelings that we have no control over Pásmo at all, and so we can't prevent further bullshit like in numbers 10, 11-12! In short, Devětsil wants Pásmo to be controlled by Prague in the next year and to increase the quality substantially. In editorial terms. It is proposed from the Prague Devětsil that the head editor (rédacteur en chef) for this year should be myself, the acting editor-in-chief, i.e., géant, you.]

An "executive" order follows in September demanding that *Pásmo* be edited by Teige completely and in all respects, including typography and layout:

Ale aby Pásmo [...] bylo mnou opravdu redigováno (- t.j. aby tam nebylo nic bez mého vědomí, mé kontroly a korektury a bych je lámal), to je nejen mé přání ale i usnesení Devětsilu. (Teige to Černík, Sept. 12, 1925; spelling preserved; A. Černík papers, PNP Praha)

[And Pásmo needs to be really edited by myself (i.e., nothing without my knowledge, my control and correction in it and that I do the layout), that is not only my wish but also the resolution of the Devětsil.]

But there was still more to come when *Pásmo* vol. 2, no. 3, appeared in December 1925, featuring Parisian music-halls:

Milý Černíku,

zuřím na poslední dvě čísla *Pásma*. Proč je to svinstvo na obálce? Za jedno: je to kýč jako divadlo. Sluší-li se aby moderní časopis zdurazňoval co je v music hallu a v revui moderního, měl by se pečlivě štítit toho, co je v nich kýče, sentimentality, svinstva a ne to dávat na obálku. A co se týká fyzické krásy. Jak bylo by skvělé kdyby tu byla velká reprodukce nějaké tělesné krásy, třeba něco z onoho Ufa filmu, ty dvě dívky na břehu jezera či pod. Ale reprodukovat starou bachratou matronu se svislými prsy. (Teige to Černík, January 9, 1926; spelling preserved; A. Černík papers, PNP Praha)

[Dear Černík:

I'm furious about the last two numbers of *Pásma*. Why is this crap on the cover? For one thing: it's kitsch as theater is. If it is appropriate for a modern magazine to emphasize what is in the music hall and modern shows, it should carefully avoid kitsch, sentimentality, filth and not put it on the cover. And in terms of physical beauty - how great would it be if there was a big reproduction of some physical beauty, like something from that Ufa movie, the two girls on the lake shore or under. But a reproduction of an old clumsy matron with hanging breasts?]

It is not easy to establish whether Teige's criticism resulted in any immediate changes, although we note that volume two actually switched to a smaller format as Teige also required. But on January 9, 1926, Teige resolutely states that he is leaving *Pásma's* editorial board. Admittedly, these were already the last days of the enterprise. The magazine did not survive volume two, 1925/26, which was not entirely a sole result of criticism coming from Prague.

Clearly, one could argue that we are dealing with usual frictions among editors, with no substantial value. Moreover, a material limit is imposed on our interpretation since only letters by Teige to Černík are preserved so we can listen to one party only, namely Prague. Teige does not communicate any criticism ad hominem, he mainly focuses on content, layout and matters of production. At the same time, however, he repeatedly speaks on behalf of the whole Prague group, which leads to the conclusion that these documents demonstrate an attempt to create the proper pecking order that is not exclusively based on his personal opinions.

In sum, the langue that comes from Prague is clear - Prague wants to be the center. Note expressions such as "control" and the line of command that Teige proposes. In other words, we must acknowledge a perspective in which a hierarchical dichotomy, or asymmetry, is knowingly asserted. Significantly, this asymmetry does not involve any international borders. It projects asymmetry within one country and one linguistic territory, providing us with an example of a hierarchy that can be discussed without any grand West-East connotations.

## LETTERS TO PARIS

In 1934, the Czech - or, Prague - Surrealist group was founded. The initiative of the poet Vítězslav Nezval (1900-1956) was crucial in this development and since Devětsil, whose core member Nezval had been, was distant memory, Nezval's initiative played a major role in reviving and reshaping the Czech avant-garde. Over the next four years,

however, Nezval's authority as a Surrealist was somewhat diminishing, which was in part due to his wavering position on Surrealism's relation to the Communist Party. Nezval was not alone in this; similar discussions were conducted in France. Nezval was trying to keep the balance – he continued to publish surrealist poetry<sup>5</sup> and as late as January 1938 he defended the two core artists of Czech Surrealism, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, in an extensive preface to the catalogue of their exhibition. And yet on March 7, 1938, he announced the dissolution of the Surrealist group.

What happened in early March 1938, when Nezval dissolved the group, can be reconstructed based on at least two major sources: the letters exchanged after Nezval's act between the Prague Surrealist group and Paris in March – May 1938, and Karel Teige's pamphlet of May 1938 entitled *Surrealismus proti proudu* [*Surrealism Against the Current*] which rephrases and extends accounts we find in the correspondence. Both sources mention a meeting in which a rather rough discussion occurred that resulted in the idea of excluding Nezval from the group. But Nezval turned the tables on the group and quickly dissolved the group first – an act that the group did not accept. Nonetheless, Nezval's action was instantly applauded by the leading representatives of Communist cultural leadership, Julius Fučík and Kurt Konrad,<sup>6</sup> which may plausibly suggest a background presence of the Communist Party. After the drama was over, Nezval would have new friends. Beginning April 1938, Aragon, Eluard, and Erenburg emerge in his writings as new points of reference, all of them good Party members in their countries, none of them on talking terms with Breton.

Turning back to our main subject, the center-periphery relation, the formal reaction of the Surrealist group is significant. Specifically, we focus on the “mail” traces that the dispute left behind. The first preserved document is a collective letter by the group to Breton from March 17, 1938 (Lot 2220). Addressed “A André Breton et tous les camarades du groupe surréaliste de Paris” [To André Breton and all the comrades of the group of Surrealists of Paris] the collective letter goes well beyond the format of a standard letter – we are in fact dealing with an entire dossier that assembles items that unveil Nezval's defection from Surrealism.<sup>7</sup>

The letter is quick in stating that “La notice de Nezval prouve que son auteur manifeste pas trop dans sa méthode la conception stalinienne de la démocratie en croyant de pouvoir effacer par un trait de plume une collectivité qu'est notre groupe surréaliste” [Nezval's note proves that its author's method is not short of the Stalinist conception of democracy by believing that he can erase with a stroke of the pen a collectivity that

5 For an English-language study of Nezval's 1930s, see Garfinkle (2003).

6 The communist critic Julius Fučík stated on March 18, 1938, that the group became a hotbed of political decay: “Nezvalův čin rázně pomáhá k likvidaci páté kolony mezi inteligencí. Vyrazil dveře, pečlivě zamykané trockistickými šejdří.” (Fučík 1938) [Nezval's deed helps resolutely in the liquidation of the fifth column among intelligentsia. He crashed the door carefully guarded by Trotskyite swindlers.] A day later another Communist critic, Kurt Konrad, continued in *Haló noviny*, stating that Nezval's act was one of “disinfection” (“[...] je činem téměř desinfekčním”; Konrad 1938).

7 Probably the first item in these exchanges was a telegram dispatched to Paris to André Breton on March 15, 1938 – the item is unfortunately not extant. Nor do we have Nezval's letter(s) to Breton. However, a short letter by Nezval to Péret (May 10, 1938) is extant. All these documents resurged in the auction of Breton's estate in 2003; see the DVD attached to the catalogue, specifically lots 2220 and 2221 (see Lots in the bibliography below). Additionally, André Breton's answer to Nezval from March 18, 1938, is preserved in Nezval papers at PNP (see the following note).

our surrealist group represents.] (ibid.). Although apparently drafted by Teige, the letter is a collective statement letting Breton know that the group met, did not agree with Nezval, and excluded him as a result. We find here also a relatively detailed description of the tumultuous meeting that triggered everything. The letter is signed by the members of the group. A second collective letter, again with a documentation and signatures, followed on March 23, 1938.

As for the reaction, we have only partial documentation. Breton reacted with several letters, of which only that to Nezval is preserved. In it he encouraged caution and encouraged cooperation, but in a post scriptum he added:

PS Nemusím Vám říkat, že rozhodně odmítám Vaše básně: 4. červenec 1937, 3 smuteční básně a XX. Výročí. Žádám Vás, abyste je bez jakýchkoli okolků co nejenergetičtěji popřel. (Breton to Nezval, March 18, 1938; quoted from the Czech translation in Nezval 1981: 98f.)

[PS I do not have to tell you that I resolutely reject your poems “July, 4, 1937”, the three commemorative poems [about Masaryk; J.T.], and the poem “Twentieth Anniversary”. I ask you to renounce them energetically and with no delay.]

This note clearly shows that the red line was crossed, but whether we can say that Breton was pleased by the “file” he received from Prague remains open. The poem about the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution was pro-Stalinist and the poems on the occasion Masaryk’s passing could be interpreted as nationalistic.

On the whole, the chronology of these events can be described reasonably well. Deep causes will be hard to determine but as pointed out above, politics was in the background. This is in line with interpretations of Nezval’s behavior that have been proposed in the literature: the historian Ivan Pfaff has emphasized the political aspects, as have Alessandro Catalano (2008) and Milan Drápala (1996) been. Of course, these aspects were felt by the main actors of the affair themselves, especially by Nezval. The March days were days of a general collapse of the European political order. A newspaper reader who read about the disbandment of the Surrealist group read almost simultaneously about the call-up of Czech reservists for training and about the *Anschluss* – Hitler marched into Austria on March 12, 1938. Other factors played a role as well, including Moscow show trials. The third trial, conducted in March 1938, was apparently aggressively supported by Nezval during the tumultuous meeting as the group’s letter indicates:

Nezval, d’une façon injurieuse, en employant des mots les plus gros et bas, a déclaré qu’il faillait, d’un accord ab[s]olu, approuver la politique actuelle de l’Union Soviétique et cela; et quant aux procès intentés contre les collaborateurs de Lénine, et en ce qui concerne certains faits de politique culturelle soviétique, p. e. la suppression du théâtre Meierhold qui, au dire de Nezval, n’a été autre chose qu’une agence d’espionnage! (March 17, 1938; Lot 2220)

[In an insulting way, using the crudest and coarsest words, Nezval declared that it was absolutely necessary to approve the present policy of the Soviet Union, in-

cluding the trials with Lenin's collaborators, as well as other facts of Soviet cultural policy, for instance, the suppression of the Meierchold theatre, which, according to Nezval, was nothing more than a spy agency!]

The atmosphere of anxiety was strong. When in April 1938 the exhibition of Štyrský and Toyen was opening in Brno, Roman Jakobson was among the speakers. When Toyen later asked him for his speech, he told her that he flushed it in the toilet.

Turning back to the dossier, we note that it indicted Nezval on two counts one of which was Stalinism, nationalism being the other.<sup>8</sup> Itemizing the offences by way of poems, the dossier included a pro-Stalinist poem by Nezval written on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the October revolution, poems on the Czechoslovak president Masaryk, and more. On the whole, the dispatch to Paris surprises by its details – as if this were a file on someone. Note that originals in the form of newspaper clippings were enclosed. But more significantly, the file was submitted to the “head-quarters.” By this token Prague Surrealists demonstrated their loyalty to the center.

## IN CONCLUSION

Based on two cases from the history of Czech avant-garde, we argue that avant-garde does not necessarily lack behavior that is structured in the terms of center and periphery. Despite differences, the two cases are both suitable to show that hierarchies exist, specifically in the form of competitive behavior and loyalty articulations, all the same whether we think of the environment as centered or decentered, verticalized or horizontalized. Recognizing this fact should result in a more nuanced image of interwar networks while helping us critically evaluate the function of emancipatory discourses of our days.

In the first case we see a confrontational assertion of authority – Prague Devětsil explicitly states that it wants to control its Brno counterpart. The reasons largely revolve around the content of the Brno avant-garde magazine *Pásmo*. Although worded by Teige, the case must be understood as representing the interaction between two groups. Moreover, the case is “elementary” in not involving any cross-border relations—the configuration is free of any East-West connotations.

The second case essentially presents the same Prague group of authors and artists – including Nezval, Štyrský, Teige, Toyen – but differs in complexity. By mid-1930s, the group was a member of a distinct network, that of Surrealism, which had an international quality, whereby the centrality of Paris was relatively clear. As a result, and unlike the first case, which had no international impact, Czech Surrealists now operated within an international space. We may add that the central members of the Paris group, André Breton and Paul Eluard, visited Prague in 1935, strengthening both their standing in Paris and Prague (see Sayer 2013). Although this proselytic visit upheld the position of the Prague group within Czechoslovakia, it also reinforced its status as a local branch.

8 A collection of “exhibits” in the original and French translations was attached. It included newspaper clippings about the disbandment of the group, some critical commentaries (most notably by communist critics Fučík (1938) and Konrad (1938)), and select poems by Nezval.

Not surprisingly then, the Nezval conflict was reported to the center although this was in fact not requested. We can only speculate whether the possibility of not contacting the center was considered. If so, this solution was not chosen. Instead, a voluminous folder with incriminating “exhibits” was created, eventually expressing loyalty to the center, perhaps with the understanding that this might optimize the functioning of the network. In this sense the focus of explanation shifts to the way an asymmetrical relation is handled and evaluated by the participants. Prague Surrealists obviously concluded that articulating their position vis-à-vis the center was an acceptable way to handle a conflict. At the same time, elementary group dynamic mechanisms were at work that do not necessarily rely on a broad context. Reported or not, exclusion of a member of the group is a major tool that is meant to strengthen group identity.<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, the two cases, although showing differences, demonstrate the force of the center-periphery relation, although each in a different way. In the first case, Prague attempts to be a center, in the second case, Prague essentially assumes the position of a periphery.

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9 Quite in line with the mechanism of scapegoating as understood by René Girard (1982).

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