
The Multi-layered Modernism.

(On Alexandra Chiriac, *Performing Modernism. A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2022)

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From the very first glance, Alexandra Chiriac's book, *Performing Modernism. A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest* (De Gruyter, Berlin, 2022) introduces and also portrays a modernism that seems so frantic, so flexible and so animated that the usually imposed dissociation regarding the modernity paradigm in itself, a dissociation referring to art form, on one hand, and a form of life, on the other hand, seems simply superfluous. The study is primarily oriented towards a foreign reader, for whom, as Michel de Certeau (*L'Invention du quotidien*, 1980) puts it, "marginality becomes universal", in the sense that a discourse on a Romanian and Jewish avant-garde at the same time would actually generate the potential for a double appeal to an audience seeking both rare and familiar charms.

Performing Modernism. A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest is, however, a book that nevertheless addresses itself to a multi-layered cultural audience. It can be claimed by art history, sociology and literary studies, through what becomes a theory of an "applied" modernism, which comes alive and pulses both through the radiography of figures previously captured exclusively in a group photograph of interwar Romania. At least from the literary studies perspective, this applied, pragmatic modernism has in mind not only the artistic dimension, but also the pedagogical and consumerist side, as Irina Livezeanu records in the *Preface* of the study. It is basically a modernism that grows and educates its public, but moreover it allows itself to be shaped and influenced by its inner needs. Furthermore, it is a modernism that does not dissociate itself from the avant-gardes, being inclusively assumed and designed, in the very spirit of recent modernist researches. The visual artists are thus scanned alongside the literati and their impressions and attitudes complement each other in a quite democratising perspective of the interwar cultural space.

Perhaps the most obvious theoretical achievement of the study is what one might call an integrated modernism, which simply refers to a fragment literature that perfectly makes sense in an assemblage in the form of a collection, an exhibition or an archive – or in the format of all of them together. Consequently it is not a mere accident that the readers can thus refer to a sort of an ecology of the avant-garde performance that becomes, as the author herself points out, "a form of embodied knowledge that is as valid as the tangible, written form of the archive". Alexandra Chiriac is quite successful in her process of reassembling and reconstructing some seemingly disparate, random objects – belonging to interior design, magazine covers, photographs, etc. – a system that would ultimately also prove an artistic and social modernist ethos. This approach is basically reminiscent of the strategies of a very fashionable cluster research strategy: such is the case of *Magazine Studies* which aims to redefine modernism by focusing on the exploration of a corpus of small, glossy, literary or/and cultural magazines, all of them largely ignored by post-war critics.

Last but not least, the integrated modernism suggested by the author essentially textures a dialogical shawl among diverse cultural parties: between the private and the public, between the arts, the institutions that validate them and the new urban social stratum that ultimately manages them. It also explores the ways in which modernism is projected as a way of life which actually functions as an essential moment in the course of bringing art forms closer to life forms, an instant that postmodernism would later intricately grasp without

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always mentioning the reference to it.

A perfect sample of the study's inner argumentative strategy would be the cover of *Integral* magazine from December 1926: it incorporates a photograph of "a modern decor", composed of furniture, cushions, rugs, paintings, as well as "a porcelain tea set from the Primavera studio in the Parisian Printemps shop and a book on the cubist painter Georges Braque", designed as a tableau and ordered by Brun-Maxy. The photograph actually illustrates a modern home interior as assembled in the showroom at the Academy, in an attempt to blur the boundaries between the private and the public and it is meant to sell the consumer an image of an actual, contemporary interior, a totally different one, if one is to compare it with that recommended by a possible artificial organisation of exhibits in a showcase. Thus the interior suggested by Brun-Maxy displays an intimate and a functional living space, a minimalist but an airy-cosy-cool one. If this atmosphere seems perfectly liveable today, in the modernity of a hundred years ago, such consumer objects barely made an appearance. Christine Frederick's book *Selling Mrs Consumer* (1929), quoted by Alexandra Chiriac, proves this particular specificity by highlighting the importance of suggestion in marketing new interiors.

In all these respects, the most obvious virtue of this study is its ability to identify in its intriguing strategy of displaying the very peculiarities of the integrated modernism, a structure that demands not only interdisciplinary skills and intelligence flexibility, but also the proper tools to deliver persuasive associations and also to determine the readers to actively involve themselves in the book's journey.