

PART II



Unity in Dualism:  
The 1920s



## CHAPTER 3



# Tendentious Modernism: Functionalism and Mass Culture

On a star-lit evening in the spring of 1923, according to the reminiscences of Vítězslav Nezval, he and Teige ‘discovered’ Poetism as they walked through Prague surrounded by drunkards and prostitutes, while paradoxically intoxicated with the beauty of the modern world.<sup>1</sup> That very same spring the Czech poet Stanislav Kostka Neumann wrote: ‘A poem is not a slogan, but if our proletarian poems cannot be as simple, clear, and effective as our slogans, then to the devil with all poetry, to the devil with all art, and let us become good orators for the proletariat rather than good poets for the petite bourgeoisie.’<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to imagine two conceptions of modern poetry and the poetic more starkly contrasting than these: on the one hand, Nezval and Teige’s ‘art of wasting time’ and ‘lyrical-sculptural excitement at the wonder of the modern world’, and on the other, Neumann’s ‘simple, clear, unabashedly tendentious verses.’<sup>3</sup> These positions represent antipodes of left-wing European literary politics in the interwar period: poetry as either liberation or agitation — either positing liberation achieved from the capitalist order or demanding urgent agitation to overthrow the capitalist order. Yet just over a year earlier, Neumann had served as model and mentor for Teige and Devětsil, and all of them acknowledged the centrality of tendentiousness for progressive cultural activity. The tortuous career of this aesthetic ideal in the early years of Devětsil is a prominent feature of the Czech avant-garde, but also reveals significant dynamics within modernism more generally.

The category of tendentiousness sits uncomfortably within most accounts of twentieth-century European aesthetics. By resisting rather than contributing to the triumphant development of high modernism and the avant-garde, the dogmatic, didactic, and aesthetically conservative forms to which tendentiousness as an

1 Vítězslav Nezval, ‘Návěští o poetismu’ [Promulgation on Poetism], in *Čtení o Karlu Teigovi*, ed. by Jan Wiendl (Prague: Institut pro studium literatury, 2015), pp. 86–87 (p. 86). Originally in *ReD*, 1.3 (1927), 94–95.

2 Stanislav Kostka Neumann, ‘Umění v sociální revoluce’ [Art in the Social Revolution], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. by Štěpán Vlačín, 3 vols (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1, 455–60 (p. 457). Originally in *Proletkult*, 2 (1923), 266–68.

3 Karel Teige, ‘Poetismus’, in *Výbor*, 1, 121–28 (pp. 123), trans. by Ian Finlay; and Neumann, ‘Umění v sociální revoluce’, p. 457.

ideal generally gave rise appear as a mere sideshow to, or indeed as a rearguard action against, the most important cultural dynamics of the time. Worse yet, by encouraging a reductively political discourse, tendentiousness (as a matter of historical record) placed literature and art ominously under the authority of self-interested diktat and played a pivotal role in the anti-modernist cultural politics of twentieth-century totalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> Yet it must be remembered that to a striking degree tendentiousness also accords with ideals widely shared within the interwar avant-garde. For tendentiousness promises to forge a link between aesthetics and political action, between art and the 'real world', thus addressing the ambition of the avant-garde to be more than a mere artistic game, to reconnect with the modern world and thereby transform life in a fundamental way. The category of tendentiousness thus appears at once persistent and peripheral, as both resisting and reinforcing the underlying ambitions of the rising twentieth-century avant-garde.

The source of this paradox lies within the constitutive logic of the avant-garde itself. The avant-gardist 'integration of art and life' presupposes a parallel between political revolt and innovation in the realm of artistic form, a parallel between the 'two avant-gardes', political and aesthetic.<sup>5</sup> Tendentiousness, by contrast, denies this parallel between political and aesthetic revolutions. It holds that art can only achieve political efficacy if it is easily understood by a wide audience; the modernist and avant-garde criterion of formal experimentation, which inevitably brings complexity, unfamiliarity, and strangeness, is thus fundamentally at odds with the demand for broad comprehensibility. The argument over whether these ideals of aesthetic experimentation and political tendentiousness can be harmonized constitutes a macro-narrative of the major European avant-garde traditions. This is the unhappy consciousness of so many of the early to mid-twentieth-century movements: Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism, and Critical Theory (to name only the most familiar examples on the Left) all argued, as did Teige, for the unity of the 'two avant-gardes', for a parallel between aesthetics and politics. Yet all met the unflinching scepticism of those who, like Neumann, demanded a clear, unambiguously expressed political message from art. There appears an unbridgeable conceptual divide between those who claimed compatibility between aesthetic and political revolution and those who denied it.

But is this opposition as absolute as it seems? Was that conceptual divide truly

4 As Teige became increasingly aware over the mid- and late 1930s, here lies a main convergence point between the National Socialist attack on 'degenerate art' and the Socialist Realist rejection of 'decadent modernism'. Far too many modernists found themselves caught in totalitarian sympathies, of course, but the cultural ideologues in power rarely returned the sentiment.

5 See the Introduction, pp. 3–4. The left-wing avant-gardes of the early and mid-twentieth century confronted this question of political engagement most directly. Texts such as Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer', André Breton's 'The Political Position of Today's Art', Jean-Paul Sartre's 'What is Literature?' and Theodor W. Adorno's 'Commitment' are among the most famous documents of the various 'aesthetics and politics' debates of this period. Arguments that Marx and Engels themselves leaned towards an aesthetic that was modernist in their time — see, e.g., Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) — do not change the historical record of anti-modernist cultural politics in the Socialist states of the mid- and late twentieth century.

unbridgeable? Here is where the micro-narrative of the Czech example, specifically Teige's development away from his early embrace of tendentiousness, becomes particularly revealing. To be sure, one might 'explain away' this surprising early development by reference to modern Czech cultural history, for the ideal of tendentiousness that Teige and Devětsil briefly shared with Neumann might appear a legacy of the early nineteenth-century Czech National Revival (*Národní obrození*) and the predisposition to judge cultural phenomena in terms of their efficacy or 'functionality' for the realization of national aspirations. The critic Alexej Kusák has stated that during the period stretching from the early National Revival through the Biedermeier era 'Czech culture took on a value system that placed functional value [*funkční hodnota*] above immanent value. The criterion for evaluation thus could not be the greatness or originality of a cultural act [...] but rather its utility, its usefulness in the political struggle of the nation. This functionality then [...] also became a criterion for the ethical value of a work'.<sup>6</sup> This accentuation of political over aesthetic criteria might easily appear as the mark of cultural belatedness: two centuries of domination within the Habsburg Empire burdened Czech culture with a reductively political agenda. For example, the acrimonious, decades-long debates in the mid- and later nineteenth century over the allegedly ancient but actually forged *Královédvorský* and *Zelenohorský* manuscripts (which earlier generations had widely invoked as evidence that the Czech literary tradition was far older than the German and therefore possessed comparable cultural legitimacy), or Jan Kollár's (1793–1852) conception in *Slávy dcera* [The Daughter of Sláva] (1824) of the poet as teacher educating his nation about its past accomplishments and sufferings, reveal how central a role political and didactic considerations played in nineteenth-century Czech and Slovak culture.<sup>7</sup> Projecting forward, one can regard this trend as merging into the macro-narrative described above and as anticipating the utilitarian political conception of literature that characterized much of Czech orthodox Marxist literary criticism from the 1920s onward. Kusák, for example, discussing leftist Czechoslovak culture in the interwar period, writes: 'the Czech variants

6 Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945–1956* (Prague: Torst, 1998), p. 23.

7 Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the political function of the Forged Manuscripts in constructing the 'imagined community' of the nascent Czech nation. The most famous manuscripts emerged in 1817–18 and were conclusively demonstrated to be forgeries in 1886. See Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu, České sny* (Prague: Academia, 2015), pp. 127–28. For discussions in English see, e.g., Dalibor Dobíáš, *The Forged Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora Manuscripts* (Prague: AVČR, 2019); Susan Helen Reynolds, 'A Scandal in Bohemia: Herder, Goethe, Masaryk, and the "War of the Manuscripts"', in *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 72 (2003), 53–67; Alfred Thomas, 'Forging Czechs: The Reinvention of National Identity in the Bohemian Lands', in *Cultures of Forgery: Making Nations, Making Selves*, ed. by Judith Ryan and Alfred Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 29–51 (esp. pp. 41–44); Vladimír Macura, 'Problems and Paradoxes of the National Revival', in *Bohemia in History*, ed. by Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–97; Roman Jakobson, 'In Memory of V. V. Hanka', in idem, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 397–405; and Milan Otáhal, 'The Manuscript Controversy in the Czech National Revival', in *Cross Currents*, 5 (1986), 247–77. On Kollár, see Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1994), pp. 43–99 (esp. p. 59).

of many of the later slogans of popular character [*lidovosti*], comprehensibility, engagement, party character [*straničkovosti*], etc. have their roots precisely here in the *Vormärz* or Biedermeier period'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while the sort of orthodox Marxist cultural discourse Neumann represented ultimately achieved broad currency in interwar Europe by the mid-1930s, in Czechoslovakia its reception was, arguably, amplified by local circumstances: belatedness begot dogmatism through the shared resistance against the cultural currents that ultimately gave rise to modernism and the avant-garde.

Nonetheless, it is striking that several of the most significant Czech contributions to the interwar European discourse on modernism involve the insistent exploration of the categories of *function* and *functionalism*. The typology of functions elaborated by Jan Mukařovský and Prague School structuralism stands out in this regard, as do the signal achievements of Czech functionalist architecture.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, these discourses were intertwined and mutually reinforcing: as we shall see in Chapter Five, Teige's theoretical texts on Constructivism, for example, represent an important point of contact between Prague structuralism and Czech modernist architecture or the avant-garde in general.<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on functions is, of course, not unique to the Czech avant-garde and to a large extent reflects modernist trends developing elsewhere, particularly in France, Germany, Holland, and (somewhat later) the Soviet Union. Yet perhaps nowhere else did theoretical reflection on the concept of functionalism link such a wide range of significant cultural discourses, from architecture to general aesthetics to linguistics to economic theory. So the question

8 Kusák, *Kultura a politika*, p. 26, and see also p. 121. Also see Pavel Janoušek et al., eds, *Dějiny české literatury, 1945–1989*, 4 vols (Prague: Academia, 2007), II, 24–25. Kusák identifies this reception as the implicit conceptual framework adopted by both Neumann and Zdeněk Nejedlý (1878–1962), two of the most dogmatic Marxist critics of modernist and avant-gardist trends in the interwar period. Nejedlý, by training a music historian, ultimately became minister of education after 1948 and first president of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. He was a major shaper of cultural policy during the Gottwald era. See Kusák, *Kultura a politika*, pp. 24, 72, and 135; Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 217–18 and 303–09; and Jaromír Hořec, *Doba ortelů* (Brno: Scholaris, 1992), pp. 68–72.

9 Irina Wutsdorff writes: 'Function is one of the central concepts of the Czech Avant-Garde of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, it was discussed in the context of functionalist architecture (theory), while on the other hand the concept became first a linguistic and then later a largely anthropological model in the works of Prague structuralism'; Irina Wutsdorff, 'Approaches to an Anthropologically-Oriented Theory of Literature and Culture in the Czech Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Prague Structuralism', in *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West*, ed. by Irina Wutsdorff, Michał Mrugalski and Schamma Schahadat (Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 632–52 (p. 632). See Chapter 1, note 71 for important studies with good bibliographies on Czech structuralism in English. For recent re-appreciations of the significance of Czech functionalism within the history of modernist architecture, see Jean-Louis Cohen's 'Introduction' to Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*, trans. by Irena Žantovská Murray and David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000), especially pp. 1–5 and the references in Cohen's notes; and Derek Sayer, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Building: A Cautionary Tale', in *Grey Room*, 16 (2004), 6–35 (especially pp. 10–16). In the context of early twentieth-century Czech functionalist discourses one should also mention the economic theory of the economist, philosopher and politician Karel Engliš (1880–1961), whom Mukařovský cited as an influence on Prague structuralism.

10 Mutual influences between Mukařovský and Teige will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

arises: why should these functionalist developments have found such an enthusiastic reception and fruitful elaboration in interwar Czechoslovakia?

The post-National Revival discourse of cultural tendentiousness described above, with the ‘belatedness’ it implies, inevitably presents itself in this context. Tendentiousness, naturally, does not have precisely the same meaning or function in the nineteenth century that it took on in the twentieth. Yet the early exaggeration of the political function of culture might plausibly be understood to have produced heightened sensitivity to the variety of functions culture could serve and ultimately to have led to exploration of the specifically aesthetic function — a hallmark of Czech modernist aesthetics. Equally, the concerted attempts to overcome the legacy of nineteenth-century tendentiousness may well have inscribed it, in invisible ink as it were, within the culture of the emerging modernism and avant-garde of the Czech *fin de siècle*. Literary and art journals such as *Moderní revue* [The Modern Review] (from 1894) and *Volné směry* [Free Directions] (from 1896), for example, are primarily remembered for opening Czech culture up to broader European movements such as Symbolism, Decadence, and the Secession, and for helping to liberate Czech cultural discourse from subordination to political criteria.<sup>11</sup> In this respect the Czech *fin de siècle* represents a crucial break with Revivalist rhetoric and anticipates Devětsil and the interwar avant-garde.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite these conscious attempts to move beyond a conception of culture that was nationally focused and socially tendentious, traces of the earlier discourse remained. The critic F. X. Šalda, for example (who, as we have seen, was an important early supporter of Devětsil in the 1920s and had been an editor of *Volné směry* in the early 1900s), is one of the first figures in Czech culture to link modernist culture as a whole with the early functionalist or ‘constructive’ rationalism of figures such as H. P. Berlage, Hermann Muthesius, and Otto Wagner. Yet Šalda did not argue for this modernist approach to architecture and culture purely on aesthetic grounds. At the end of his glowing review of Berlage’s *Grundlagen und Entwicklung der Architektur* [The Foundations and Development of Architecture] (1908), for example, Šalda lashed out at the developers of the recently completed Prague Municipal House (*Obecní dům*, 1903–12;

11 On *Moderní revue*, see Neil Stewart, *Bohemiens im böhmischen Blätterwald: Die Zeitschrift Moderní revue und die Prager Moderne* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2019); and Otto Urban and Luboš Merhaut, eds, *Moderní revue, 1894–1925* (Prague: Torst, 1995). On *Volné směry*, see Roman Prahla and Lenka Bydžovská, *Volné směry: Časopis české secese a moderny* (Prague: Torst, 1993).

12 See Robert B. Pynsent, ‘Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation’, in *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Robert B. Pynsent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 111–248 (p. 121). As Pynsent points out elsewhere, the break with Revivalist rhetoric had already been initiated by the preceding generation of writers such as Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) and Julius Zeyer (1841–1901); see Pynsent, ‘Czech Decadence’, in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, 4 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 1, 348–63 (p. 349). One of the other major documents of the Czech *moderna*, the ‘Manifest české moderny’ [Manifesto of Czech Modernism] (1895), does advance explicitly political aims, such as greater cooperation between Czechs and Bohemian Germans, universal suffrage, and greater integration of women into social and cultural life. This is clearly a call for a tolerant politics, however, and thus fits well with the critical individualism espoused elsewhere in the ‘Manifesto’ and with the cosmopolitanism of these *fin-de-siècle* movements as a whole.

see Fig. 3.1), now regarded as one of the central architectural monuments of the Czech Secession, but which Šalda asserted merely continued in the whimsical and wilful decorativism of retrograde Czech historicism. He lamented: ‘If only a thousand people were to understand that this concerns the very spiritual health of the nation, then I maintain they would confound the municipal politics that has dirtied itself with such an artistic vulgarity as the so-called Representational House [i.e., the Municipal House]: not for a day would they contend with anyone who was complicit in this national and artistic embarrassment’.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1900s, therefore, Šalda still couched his defence of international modernism in a didactic argument: modernism was to bring cultural maturity to the Czech nation. Functionalism as aesthetic principle was desirable not only for its promise to create a coherent modern culture but also for its function in creating a cosmopolitan, and therefore ‘healthy’, national culture. Even a figure such as Jiří Karásek (1871–1951), an editor of *Moderní revue*, a long-term adversary of Šalda, and an outright *Décadent* who wrote that ‘the attempt to make art socially useful and beneficial leads to the denigration of art into literary craft’, never entirely shunned themes that were nationalist or socially didactic in nature, even if their treatment was often eccentric in nature.<sup>14</sup> The historian Peter Bugge has stated the conundrum aptly: ‘Czech decadence has, to be decadent, to reject anything “naturally” or “conventionally” Czech, but this gesture of negation not only inscribes it in an archetypically Czech tradition, it also puts it in the service of a project it by nature had to rebel against: the development of Czech national culture’.<sup>15</sup>

Paradoxically, then, the concept of functionalism, which underlay some of the most rigorously modernist developments in interwar Czech culture, just may have found such fertile ground there for reasons generally regarded as regressive. If such a claim is plausible, then clearly one would have to revise the easy, bipolar scheme whereby the National Revival legacy of national tendentiousness anticipated only the anti-modernist currents represented by Neumann in interwar Czech culture. More broadly, however, such an affinity would suggest that the macro-narrative of tendentiousness as an ‘anti-aesthetic’ to the radical and cosmopolitan character of European modernism and the avant-garde as a whole conceals greater complexities than first appears.

Teige represents a key case study in this context. Did the burden of ‘belatedness’ weigh on him as well? Is this the best explanation for that initial alliance with Neumann and the ideal of tendentiousness? In Chapter One we have seen how in cultural debates on the Left Teige almost without exception took the most radical side. This began early: in 1921 Teige argued that Devětsil must openly declare

13 F. X. Šalda, ‘H. P. Berlage: Grundlagen und Entwicklung der Architektur’ (1909), in idem, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička, and Karel Dvořák (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1953), xvi, 353.

14 Jiří Karásek, ‘Sociální užitečnost umění’ [The Social Usefulness of Art] (1895), here cited from *Moderní revue, 1894–1925*, ed. by Urban and Merhaut, pp. 292–93 (p. 292). See Pynsent, ‘Czech Decadence’, p. 351.

15 Peter Bugge, ‘Naked Masks: Arthur Breisky or How to be a Czech Decadent’, in *Slovo a smysl / Word & Sense*, 3.5 (2006), 259–75 (p. 262).





FIG. 3.1. Prague Municipal House (*Obecní dům*), 1903–1912.  
Prague City Archives

loyalty to communism rather than a more generalized and non-partisan idea of revolution (and during the 1920s he criticized Breton's Surrealists for their failure to do the same); in the mid-1920s Teige clashed with Devětsil's architectural section ARDEV over his strict understanding of the functionalist imperative; the ARDEV conflicts clearly presaged Teige's famous polemic at the end of the 1920s with Le Corbusier, in which Teige again took the more radical functionalist position; and finally, and most fatefully, in the Generational Discussion that shook Devětsil at the turn to the 1930s Teige took the side of those defending the ascent of the hard-line Klement Gottwald leadership within the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Teige's rejection of the tradition of nineteenth-century Czech nationalism and historicism, and later his resistance to the Socialist Realist imperative that committed art and literature must present explicit political messages, were unbending. So the radicalism and consistency of Teige's avant-gardist views would make it surprising, at the least, to identify in his understanding of international functionalism any traces of the cultural legacy he so vociferously rejected: that of nineteenth-century Czech national tendentiousness.

All of this makes Teige's and Devětsil's brief moment of alliance with Neumann and the ideal of tendentiousness from 1921 until mid-1922 all the more puzzling. The mystery deepens further when one notes that, despite the swift and decisive move away from tendentious 'Proletarian Art' marked by the key anthologies *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* and *Život II* in 1922, Teige never articulated the shift between these early positions in the form of an open break.<sup>16</sup> No less an observer than Šalda himself stated in 1928 that 'there is no break or abyss between the so-called proletarian and poetist layers of our youngest poetic movement'.<sup>17</sup> This sense of smooth transition rather than radical break makes it difficult to regard the early alliance as simply an infantile disorder, a juvenile error that Teige and Devětsil quickly corrected. Šalda even wrote: 'What did Teige want to say in his programmatic article "Poetism"? Probably this: to the devil with literature, to the devil with art!'<sup>18</sup> The near exact echo of Neumann's agitationalist exclamation, in Šalda's gloss of Teige's Poetist manifesto, indicates how muddy these waters are: Poetism is at once the diametrical opposite of that early embrace of tendentiousness, yet also its smooth continuation. So more is at stake here than merely the confusions of a young and perhaps overly enthusiastic thinker. What follows will examine the

16 Several scholars have noted this. See, for example, Esther Levinger, 'Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 48.2 (2004), 247–74; Zdeněk Pešat, 'Mezi proletářskou poezií a poetismem', *Česká literatura*, 50.5 (2002), 500–05; and Markéta Brousek, *Der Poetismus: Die Lehrjahre der tschechischen Avantgarde und ihrer marxistischen Kritiker* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975), p. 85. Levinger's account, however, does not sufficiently distinguish between the early phases of Teige's development. Pešat's interpretation of proletarian art as a distortion away from the 'natural' developmental line of Czech poetics does not account for the ongoing development and echoes of proletarian art in Socialist Realism. Brousek contrasts the 'fluid process' of Teige's development (p. 85) to the 'new beginning' marked by Nezval's joining of Devětsil (p. 79).

17 F. X. Šalda, 'O nejmladší poesii české', in idem, *Studie z české literatury*, in *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, ed. by Jan Mukařovský and Felix Vodička (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1961), VIII, 129–200 (p. 134). For Teige's own retrospective analysis of this period (albeit reflecting political pressures of the early 1950s), see his letter reproduced in *Výbor*, III, 581–86.

18 Šalda, 'O nejmladší poesii české', p. 188.

logic that guided Teige during that early shift from Proletarian Art to the avant-gardist positions adopted in 1922, focusing on two key terms: *lidovost* ('popular character') and *tendence* ('tendentiousness' or 'tendency'). My claim is that Teige was not merely working through, and out of, a Czech cultural legacy of belatedness that had generated such a strong historical commitment to tendentiousness in cultural activity. Nor did Teige simply turn with the winds of theoretical fashion, as so many of his detractors in interwar Czechoslovakia liked to believe. Rather, Teige's logic reveals smooth evolution rather than radical reversal: concepts that commonly count as aesthetically regressive led Teige to some of his most rigorously modernist positions.

Teige's early development shows the complexity and flexibility of conceptual oppositions that are all too often conceived as static. But this complexity appears in a more logically coherent light when viewed through the concerns about historical identity discussed in the previous chapter: for those concerns represent the true hinge between Teige's earlier Proletarian Art and the subsequent Constructivism–Poetism moments. Within the Czech literary historical context, the relation between tendentiousness and avant-garde functionalism calls into question the overly schematic association of later Czech Socialist Realism with the 'utilitarian' legacy of the National Revival. But more broadly, Teige's early development reveals crucial contact points between the avant-garde and conceptual trends generally deemed antagonistic to modernism and the avant-garde, contact points related to the idea of 'historical integrity'. The micro-narrative of the Czech case thus follows a less trodden path through the conceptual topography of modernism: this byroad takes shortcuts and follows detours that the macro-narrative conceals. Mapping this alternate route results in a better appreciation of how modernism — even the strident subset known as the historical avant-garde — proved receptive to and able to appropriate seemingly hostile concepts to its own ends.

### Spontaneous Responses: *Lidovost* and Mass Culture

In the context of Teige's early articulation of Proletarian Art, the first key term, *lidovost*, subsumed a particularly wide range of semantic associations. In the usual and most immediate sense it meant literally 'folkness' and conjured images of traditional peasant and folk art. In this sense the term evoked the rhetoric of Romanticism — in the Czech lands often intertwined with Herder-inspired notions of a unique national or folk 'genius' — and had played a major role in the wake of the National Revival as a designation for what was widely perceived as the 'truly Czech' culture of the heartland, as opposed to the high culture of the Germanized Bohemian aristocracy and bourgeoisie.<sup>19</sup> Even in his very early texts, however, Teige subjected

19 This can be seen as early as Josef Jungmann's *Second Conversation on the Czech Language* (1806): 'What should I say about those [who] think that if they do not know Czech it makes them fine milords and who consider Czech a peasant language. Poor little things! They don't know that where it is indigenous every language is a peasant language, and that the peasant is the most important inhabitant of the land'; Josef Jungmann, 'O jazyku českém: Rozmlouvání druhé', in Josef Jungmann, *Boj o obrození národa: Výbor z díla Josefa Jungmanna*, ed. by Felix Vodička (Prague: F. Kosek, 1948), pp.

this traditional understanding of *lidovost* to sarcastic critique. In 1921 he wrote:

Folk art [*lidové umění*]? Ah, yes, our glorious national costumes, which we say the whole world should envy! The regional costumes of Moravia and *Slovácko*, revelling in reds and a multitude of colours, the essential yield of the artistic labours of the Czechoslovak people! What a feast for the eyes to see national and Slavic flags unfurled and garnishing the façades of tall buildings, otherwise grey and sullen. And at every festive opportunity the wide avenues overflow with gallant lads and fine lasses, for it is customary to display the national consciousness and Hussite nature of our tribe by donning *slovácký* national dress!<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the nostalgic or romanticizing image of *lidovost* he mocks here, Teige wished to recuperate the term for a different use. He wished it to designate not folk art but rather popular character, and to connote wide popular appeal and intimate connection with ‘the people’, which Teige identified not with the peasantry but rather with the proletariat: ‘By “popular character” [*lidovostí*] we do not mean national specificity, ethnography, etc. There is just *one* people [*lid*] from pole to pole: the *modern proletariat*’.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while Teige claimed that the *lidovost* of Proletarian Art would result in a new strain of folk art (*lidové umění*), he certainly did not intend this as a call to imitate traditional folk art (a point that was emphasized by framing his definition with illustrations of contemporary automobiles; see Fig. 3.2). Rather, traditional folk art was to function as an analogy or ideal for art as an integral component of everyday life. The essence of *lidovost* for Teige did not consist in any specific aesthetic forms or practices: traditional folk art presented not a pattern for contemporary artists but rather an ideal that could inform an original response to a new historical situation.

In his vision of a new folk art that would be urban rather than rural, and modern rather than traditional, Teige was inspired by a small volume of meditative essays by the painter and author Josef Čapek (1888–1944), titled *Nejskromější umění* [The Humblest Art] (1920).<sup>22</sup> This eclectic collection constitutes a remarkable though little-known document in the history of modern art, and its influence on the Czech interwar avant-garde deserves particular emphasis.<sup>23</sup> Čapek focuses his

31–50 (p. 44). Derek Sayer gives a useful account of the ideological resonances of the notion of the ‘Czech folk’ (*český lid*), especially around the turn of the twentieth century; see Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, pp. 118–27. On Herder’s influence in the Czech lands, see, e.g., Jaromír Loužil, ‘K zápasu o J. G. Herder u nás’, in *Česká literatura*, 53.5 (2005), 637–53.

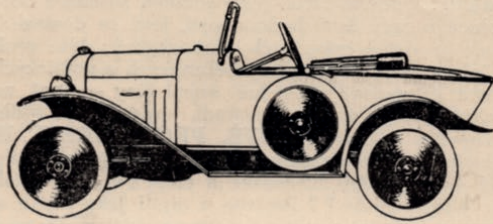
20 Karel Teige, ‘Nové umění a lidová tvorba’ [The New Art and Popular Artistic Production], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 150–54 (p. 150). *Slovácko*, or Moravian Slovakia, is a region in southern Moravia that was, and still is, particularly known for its well-maintained folk culture.

21 Karel Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’ [Art Today and Tomorrow], 1921, in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 365–82 (p. 378). Emphases in original.

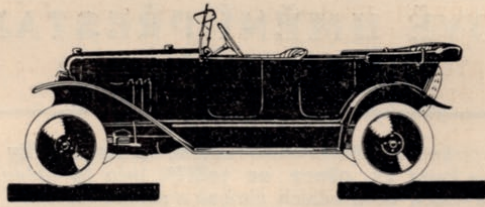
22 See Teige, ‘Nové umění a lidová tvorba’, p. 152. Čapek’s *Nejskromější umění* was published in 1920 but several of the essays had been published in journals in 1918–19.

23 *Nejskromější umění* also clearly anticipates the essays by Josef’s brother, Karel Čapek, in *Marsyas, ěili na okraj literatury* [Marsyas, or on the Periphery of Literature] (Prague: Aventinum, 1931). Karel Čapek’s essays appeared in journals for the most part in the later 1920s before being collected into one volume.

**Tendence** moderního umění je dána jeho účelností. Je důsledností, opustí-li museální atmosféru a bude-li dýchat silný, zdravý vzduch země. Nechť je krásnou zábavou a cenným potěšením, právě tak jako film, představení v cirku či fotbalový match. Nechť přivlastní si touž technickou dokonalost a pružnost, jež je vlastní atletu či akrobatu, naprostou neomylnou funkčnost, vlastní stroji. Nechť je široce srozumitelné a lidové: ale touto



lidovostí nemíníme svéráz, národopis etc. Lid jest **jeden** od pólu k pólu: **moderní proletariát**. A moderní proletariát nenosí tyrolácké, slovácké či zulukaferské kroje, ani nezpívá koledy. Otokar Březina jistě není lidovým autorem. Tím méně však Sv. Čech.



(Automodely 1923)

Tendence nového umění, daná účelností, nemůže být ideologickou zevní náplní. **Tendenci plakátu je, býti plakátem:** co nejdůrazněji lidem něco oznámí. Je sám o sobě tendenční skutečností. Báseň i obraz musí být tendenční skutečností, o sobě, integrálně; jeho tendence je pak rodná, nutná, jednoznačná. Obraz nemůže míti nikdy tendenci satirickou, moralistní, politickou etc., poněvadž mravouka, satira, politika není jeho úkolem a účelem: úkol obrazu je jiný, než úkol mravoučné knihy, karikatury či politického úvodníku; není proto však méně konkrétní a důležitý. Tendenci obrazu je, býti široce podívanou, obsáhlejší

attention on the peripheries of artistic activity: on painted signs over shop doors, on wooden children's toys, on outmoded furniture, on family bric-a-brac, and on the aesthetics of old photographs as well as modern American cinema. These objects share failure: they do not meet either traditionalist or modernist definitions of art. Rather than embodying eternal ideals or boisterously challenging convention, they humbly subsist on the border of Kitsch, suffering derision while offering delight. At times Čapek's observations have a Benjaminian ring (such as in his reflections on the unique aura of mid-nineteenth-century portrait photography or his obsessive fascination with the odd fragment of material culture washed up from the past), while at other moments he sounds almost Heideggerian, such as in his description of entering a darkened kitchen late in the evening:

Things that a moment ago were engulfed in darkness and hidden from your eyes now begin to exist: white tiled surfaces and the black iron plates of the oven start to take outline in their mutual oppositions, and this occurs without lights, without gradations of shade or reflections; that intimately familiar old oven pushes through the soft darkness, extending and rising up with an almost gentle certainty; and now these things finally *are*, they are here, living in their full dimensions with all of their being.<sup>24</sup>

Humble objects captivate Čapek because they confront one with sheer being, and this intimate experience of materiality would be impossible with 'art' objects that were not part of everyday life.<sup>25</sup> Čapek's most humble art was thus hardly unobtrusive. Rather it represented a fundamental point of contact with the world: mundanity made miraculous.

Teige took two main points from Čapek, the first being his dissociation of *lidovost* from any specific heritage of rural folk art. Of the range of everyday objects that Čapek discussed Teige was most interested in those that came from urban experience and represented specifically modern phenomena: first and foremost, cinema. The second point was Čapek's implicit transformation of the term *lidovost* from a description of a genre or formal category to a form of perception. Čapek was interested not so much in what the artist or craftsman intended as in the impression the object made, the way it shaped the everyday world. Teige again emphasized a particular form of perception he deemed crucial for the urban proletariat: enjoyment and laughter, responses that would soon become central to the felicitology of Poetism. *Lidovost*, he wrote, 'requires comprehensibility and amusement value [*srozumitelnost a zábavnost*].'<sup>26</sup> Laughter was the sign of a positive connection between the proletariat and the otherwise so threatening everyday, modern world. Furthermore, the spontaneity of laughter represented a guarantee of truthfulness: when large numbers of people responded to something with laughter, then this was a force to be taken seriously. Thus Teige's twist on Čapek's ideas identified *lidovost* with a particular response provoked: art

24 Josef Čapek, *Nejskromější umění* (Prague: Dauphin, 1997), p. 9.

25 See *ibid.*, p. 12. Čapek's discussion of use-value as a source of the particular power of the most humble art also led him to emphasize its 'constructive intentions'; see *ibid.*, p. 19.

26 Karel Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské' [The New Proletarian Art, 1922], in *Výbor*, 1, 33–63 (p. 57).

that was *lidové* would be spontaneously comprehensible and attractive to the broad masses.

Precisely this criterion made Teige in 1921 and early 1922 openly suspicious of most avant-garde experimentation and modernist innovation. The formal complexity of avant-garde works was an obstacle to broad reception. He noted critically, for example, that Picasso, Braque, and Verlaine were not truly 'popular' (*lidové*), and that Alexander Blok's works could not approach the readership enjoyed by the anonymous authors of Buffalo Bill novels.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Teige was convinced that the horrors of the World War had utterly discredited anything that even resembled fetishism of technology and progress. Italian Futurism, with its glorification of 'war [...] as the only hygiene for the world' represented an obvious target in this respect, but Teige also criticized the affirmative 'technological megalomania' of Czech Civilism as well as the 'machinism' he felt characterized much of the Soviet avant-garde.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Teige at this stage was quick to characterize practically all of the previous avant-garde movements as death agonies of the late bourgeois epoch rather than any sort of cultural rebirth. Thus, Expressionism and Dada represented for him (much as they would later for Georg Lukács) the 'final consequences of the bankruptcy of the previous art', raising to an even higher power the chaotic swirl of cultural confusion that typified art of the bourgeois era and that proletarian culture was to overcome.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Teige's earliest texts at times struck an outright anti-modernist note: he complained, for example, that the 'old art' (by which he meant practically the entire European avant-garde to that time) was bad because it was too much like modern cities, 'which we also don't like. For they are simply chaotic and spineless, aimless conglomerations of individual energies, [...] quantity but not wealth'.<sup>30</sup>

27 See 'Umění dnes a zítra', p. 367, and 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 58.

28 Karel Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy' [Images and Fore-Images] (1921), in *Výbor*, 1, 25–32 (p. 26); Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 45; and Teige's 1923 review of Ilya Ehrenburg's *Yet It Turns*, quoted in *Výbor*, 1, 520. Teige long had conflicted feelings about Italian Futurism: Marinetti's politics were naturally abhorrent to him but he had deep admiration for the 'modernolatrý' he felt the Futurists had done much to propagate. In late 1921 Teige and Devětsil hosted Marinetti during his visit to Prague, but privately Teige referred to him as 'that nut'. See Rea Michalová, *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde* (Prague: Kant, 2018), p. 173.

29 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 28. See also Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 49; and Teige, 'Umění přítomnosti' [Art of the Present], in *Život II: Nové umění, konstrukce, soudobá intelektuální aktivita* [Life II: The New Art, Construction, Contemporary Intellectual Activity] (Prague: Umělecká beseda, 1922), pp. 119–32 (p. 120). Teige continued to characterize Dada as the culminating product of bourgeois social crisis even after he began to appreciate its importance as a preparatory stage for later avant-garde movements. See his 'Dada', in *Host*, 6 (1926), 37–44 (pp. 38–39) (later incorporated as a chapter in *Svět, který voní*), translated in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. by Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), pp. 376–83 (pp. 379–80). Also see Jindřich Toman, 'Dada Well-Constructed: Karel Teige's Early Rationalism', in *Umění*, 43.1–2 (1995), 29–33; and Jindřich Chalupecký, 'O dada, surrealismu, a českém umění', in *idem, Cestou necestou* (Jinočany: H & H, 1999), pp. 194–228.

30 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 29. See also Teige's claim that *peinture pure* and the simultaneous poetry of Apollinaire 'presupposed forms that were surprising, mechanical and sharp, resembling the foundation of megalopolises with wide commercial avenues, factories and skyscrapers' as well as 'gigantic, monstrous, inhuman pistons, transmissions, and levers'; Karel Teige, 'Novým směrem' [In a New Direction], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 90–96 (p. 91).

These early suspicions towards much of the avant-garde and anything resembling a machine cult were the flip side of Teige's recurring claim that the new art was intrinsically 'humanist'. Teige claimed that 'only a human being can form the content (by no means the object!) of a work of art', and he contrasted this orientation with the machine fetishism that, he felt, had led Léger to proclaim the machine gun as an ideal art object.<sup>31</sup> Precisely what this humanism entailed was not very clear. But it related semantically back to the category of *lidovost*, a relation that could appear etymological as well, since the Czech term *lid*, meaning a people or the folk, also forms the root of such words as *lidstvo* and *lidskost*, denoting humankind in general and the quality of humanity or humaneness. Indeed, precisely these resonances distinguish the Czech term from the German term 'völkisch' and allowed Teige to construe *lidovost* as something potentially progressive and cosmopolitan.<sup>32</sup>

Teige revised most of these anti-avant-gardist positions fundamentally within a few years (in some cases within a few months). Nonetheless, these statements cannot be discounted simply as expressions of an immature or passing phase. For it is the transformation (or even, in some cases, retention within a new context) of these claims that is striking within Teige's development away from the paradigm of Proletarian Art over the course of 1922 and 1923. His conception of humanism reflects this clearly: while in the earliest texts this had grounded his antagonism to any artistic orientation that took the machine or technological progress as inspiration, Teige retained this vocabulary of humanism even after he had become a fervent proponent of Constructivism (and thus also of the aesthetic primacy of technological production). Teige presented Constructivism as a practice by which humankind could regain control over technology, to which, he claimed, it had fallen into servitude. Teige wrote: 'the machine was created by humankind, but now the machine shapes [utváří] and even rules over humanity'; thus it was the task of the avant-garde to turn this relation back the right way around.<sup>33</sup> From an early point, then, Teige's understanding of Constructivism as the humanization of technology was infused with several of the themes of classical Marxist humanism that would gain such prominence with the publication of Marx's *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts* at the end of the decade. Teige can thus plausibly be counted,

31 Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy', p. 27. See also Teige, 'Novým směrem', p. 93.

32 Teige's etymological interpretation, however, exerted little influence. Over the course of the 1940s (and especially directly after the war) the adjective *lidový* proved all too efficient in absorbing fascist ('völkisch') connotations and indeed in fusing them with Communist terminology (such as 'lidová republika', 'peoples' republic'); see Robert B. Pynsent 'Conclusory Essay: Activists, Jews, the Little Czech Man, and Germans', in *Central Europe*, 5.2 (2007), 211–333 (pp. 268–73).

33 Karel Teige, 'Doba a umění' [Art and the Age] (1923), in Karel Teige, *Stavba a báseň* [Building and Poem] (Prague: Vaněk & Votava, 1927), pp. 24–52 (p. 28). See also Karel Teige, 'K nové architektuře' [On the New Architecture] (1923), in *Výbor*, 1, 112–20 (p. 120). Cinema was perhaps the central phenomenon where Teige saw ground being reclaimed against the alienating tendencies of technology; see, e.g., Karel Teige, 'Foto kino film' (1922), in *Výbor*, 1, 64–89 (p. 67). Teige's fascination with cinema was grounded not only in its status as technological art form but also in its undeniable and spontaneous mass appeal. As Levinger remarks, Teige implicitly regarded cinema as 'a modern form of proletarian art'; Levinger, 'Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia', p. 247.



along with Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch, among the thinkers who anticipated the themes of a humanist or reform Marxism well before the publication of Marx's key early texts.<sup>34</sup> Nor did this humanist vocabulary disappear after Teige had become (in)famous as one of the most stringent theoreticians of functionalism. As late as 1928 Teige could write that Constructivism 'proclaims humankind [člověka] as the stylistic principle of architecture'.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps most crucial, however, was how Teige's early commitment to *lidovost* translated in the early to mid-twenties into a fascination with mass culture.<sup>36</sup> Teige early on identified the purist forms of *lidovost* in

westerns, Buffalo Bills, Nick Carter novels, sentimental novels, American movie serials or Chaplin's grotesques, amateur comedy theatre, *variété* jugglers, wandering minstrels, clowns and acrobatic circus riders, Springtime folk celebrations, a Sunday football match, in short almost everything on which the cultural life of the vast majority of the proletariat thrives. These literary forms [odručky] — many of you will say: deformities [zvrůdy] — are nowadays the one and most characteristic popular [*lidovou*] literature.<sup>37</sup>

The link between these disparate examples of popular culture was their proven ability to entertain masses of people (i.e., their *zábavnost*). Again, Teige viewed the essence of *lidovost* in the capacity to evoke a particular positive response. For this reason he felt that Proletarian Art must not simply depict the world in which the proletariat lived or attempt to mythologize or aestheticize factories, housing projects, union leaders, and so on. Rather, Proletarian Art had to be an art to which the proletariat spontaneously responded: 'not stories of life's miseries, not paintings of mine shafts and steelworks, but of the tropics and of far-away lands, poetry of a free and active life, which brings to the worker not a reality that crushes but rather a reality and a vision that inspire and strengthen!'<sup>38</sup> The proletariat was to act as the consumer or audience rather than the object or topic of Proletarian Art. Mass culture would in this way reinforce the construction of a working-class subjectivity.

The danger of producing mere escapist art was a danger of which Teige was aware, even if at this stage he did not have a sufficient response to it. Truly escapist art, as we have seen, was for Teige always bourgeois or traditionalist art, which required its viewers to escape to a museum, gallery, or church in order to view it. The justification for turning to mass and popular forms, with their exoticism and potential escapism, was simply the indisputable fact that 'the people' responded to it: only in this way could one let the proletariat dictate the terms of its own art. This

34 This is likely one of the reasons why Teige represented such an important inspiration for Czech reform Marxism in the 1960s: see, e.g., Robert Kalivoda, *Moderní duchovní skutečnost a marxismus* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1970), and Květoslav Chvatík, *Smysl moderního umění* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965), especially pp. 78–79.

35 Karel Teige, 'K teorii konstruktivismu' [Towards a Theory of Constructivism, 1928], in *Výbor* 1: 360–70 (p. 365). In the next chapter we shall see how this understanding of 'Constructivist humanism' complicates Teige's 'Mundaneum debate' with Le Corbusier.

36 See, e.g., Jan Mukařovský, ed., *Dějiny české literatury*, 4 vols (Prague: Akademie, 1995), IV, 199; and Levinger, 'Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia', p. 251.

37 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 58.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

criterion of spontaneous response, Teige felt, guaranteed that the new Proletarian Art would not be simply frivolous but rather that it hit a communal nerve and touched on something truly modern. Thus Teige increasingly emphasized the criterion that the new art be entertaining and engrossing, that its primary goal be to make its spectators happy. This is a fundamental point of contact between Teige's understanding of Proletarian Art and the later felicitology of Poetism.

The association of *lidovost* with what I have termed a criterion of spontaneous response reveals how smoothly Teige shifted between the discourses of the Proletkult and the avant-garde. The criterion of spontaneity emerged from the category of comprehensibility (*srozumitelnost*) and the anti-élitism or even anti-intellectualism inherent in the demand that art and literature take their inspiration from working-class culture. In this regard the early Teige remained well within the orbit of Proletkult doctrine. Simultaneously, however, by presenting mass culture as paradigmatic for the spontaneous response that allegedly ensured art's deeper rootedness in modern society, Teige identified that response with the achievement of a direct, or even 'organic', integration of art and modern life. Clearly, this association of Proletarian Art with mass culture came at the expense of traditional notions of artistic value. Teige's formulations thus implicitly posit the 'negation of autonomous art' and the 'reuniting of art and life' commonly regarded as fundamental to the historical avant-garde movements. Neumann immediately sensed the implications of Teige's shift, and some of his earliest polemics with Teige concerned precisely the latter's understanding of *lidovost*.<sup>39</sup> The Czech doctrine of Proletarian Art, therefore, represents a common ideological source from which branched two cultural currents — the avant-gardism of a figure like Teige and the anti-modernism of a figure like Neumann — that would become ever more bitterly opposed.<sup>40</sup>

### The Efficacy of Art: *Tendence* and Functionalism

The second key term in Teige's early writings, *tendence*, underwent a swift and surprising evolution. It cannot be overemphasized that Teige — the later proponent of a radical elimination of didactic tendency, and indeed of narrative content as such — began his theoretical career as an earnest defender of tendentiousness. The early manifesto 'Proletářské umění', which Teige co-wrote with the poet Jiří Wolker, makes this clear: 'Every art conscious of its task has been tendentious. Proletarian art is more tendentious than others, since it is more conscious of its task and expresses itself concretely'.<sup>41</sup> Teige and Wolker even quote at length

39 See S. K. Neumann, 'K otázce umění třídního a proletářského' [On the Question of Class-Based and Proletarian Art, 1923], in S. K. Neumann, *Konfese a konfrontace: Stati o umění a kultuře*, ed. by Jiří Holý and Milada Chlěbcová (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1988), II, 388–427 (pp. 406–11). Also see Chvatík, *Bedřich Václavek*, pp. 73–76.

40 See in this respect Jiří Stromšík, 'Rezeption der europäischen Moderne in der tschechischen Avantgarde', in *Moderne in der deutschen und der tschechischen Literatur*, ed. by Klaus Schenk (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2000), pp. 29–68 (pp. 52–53).

41 Jiří Wolker [and Karel Teige], 'Proletářské umění' [Proletarian Art, 1922], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, I, 220–24 (pp. 221–22).

a statement on tendentiousness in art by the poet and political journalist Karel Havlíček Borovský (1821–1856), thus explicitly alluding to the post-Biedermeier-era legacy of cultural politicization.<sup>42</sup> The further evolution of Teige's understanding of *tendence*, however, reveals clearly how the early Teige could exploit and emphasize the logical tensions within a concept in order to end up in a position that appears diametrically opposed.

The key text in this evolution is the 1922 essay 'Nové umění proletářské' [The New Proletarian Art], which represents Teige's first major attempt to redefine the concepts set forth in 'Proletářské umění' and thus stands halfway between the doctrine of Proletarian Art and Constructivism. Teige here retains *tendence* as a critical category, claiming that, in contrast to the 'artistic bankruptcy' of Futurism and other recent avant-garde movements, the most current art is characterized by '*tendentiousness and collectivity*'.<sup>43</sup> But he also begins to distinguish between the 'usual understanding' and his own concept of *tendence*. The citation from Havlíček Borovský returns once again and serves Teige as a foil against which the 'pseudovalues' of such nineteenth-century Czech and Slovak patriotic writers as Kollár, František Ladislav Čelakovský (1799–1852), and Josef Kajetán Tyl (1808–1856) are revealed as empty. Havlíček Borovský's demand that tendentious poetry '*must above all truly be POETRY, because bad poetry with the finest tendentiousness will never be tendentious poetry*', serves as Teige's model for denouncing 'the common tendentious pseudopoetry of today'.<sup>44</sup> The origin of such tendentious pseudopoetry, Teige argued, lay in a historical misunderstanding and a failure to distinguish between two forms of tendentiousness. The first form, tendentiousness as commonly understood — that is, literature that functioned as party propaganda, 'bearing the stamp of party bureaucracy and inspired from above' — was in fact only a subgenre of tendentious art and represented the artistic style appropriate to meet the specific demands made on art during openly revolutionary periods.<sup>45</sup> But to raise such a narrow understanding of tendentiousness to the level of a fundamental criterion for art at all times, as Teige now accused the Proletkult of doing, was an error.

The second, broader form of tendentiousness upheld not art's obligation to communicate particular information or viewpoints but rather its fundamental obligation to seek social relevance and effective forms of engagement with the contemporary world. This form of tendentiousness represented a cogent response to the claim that the highest criterion for art, and the first prerequisite for the artist, was absolute freedom. For Teige, the absolute freedom of the bourgeois artist — ultimately culminating in the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, or an art answerable to nothing outside of itself — was not a form of liberation or privileged access to hidden truths. Rather, he insisted, it represented banishment, loneliness, and delusion. The

42 The Havlíček quote was particularly attractive to Teige and Wolker because it attempted to defend the category of tendentiousness against its cruder manifestations (see below).

43 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 49. Emphasis in original.

44 Teige quotes Havlíček Borovský (with the emphasis) in Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 54. His own comment appears on page 53 of the same article.

45 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 55.

doctrine of absolute artistic freedom was deluded because it substituted contingent individual beliefs for binding collective truth. Teige thus linked the proper form of tendentiousness to the need to overcome the aesthetic chaos of the present (the result of competition between the incompatible artistic visions of individual artists) and to identify artistic principles that could serve as a foundation for a unified, communal cultural paradigm that would be a truthful reflection of the modern world. To those who objected that tendentiousness resulted in the loss of art's freedom and its bondage to extra-artistic principles, Teige responded that not all forms of freedom were desirable. The aesthetic liberation he associated with the October Revolution was certainly not the negative freedom so dear to the bourgeois artist, which by striving to remove all obstacles ended in a complete lack of commitment: 'The absolute freedom of art has been a most precious principle for many artists. Many artists and aestheticians have considered art to endure outside of life and its temporal order, unhindered by political and moral laws; art floating in a vacuum of boundless freedom, was unable to anchor itself securely in concrete life'.<sup>46</sup> Teige argued that the positive liberation enacted by the October Revolution, by contrast, released art and culture into areas from which they had previously been banished and brought them back into an integral relationship with society as a whole: 'The cultural activity of the Russian Revolution begins with the realization that *the reciprocal dependence and connection of art and life* liberates artistic practice in that it once again binds it to a social calling'.<sup>47</sup> Thus the criterion of social engagement or political commitment — that is, tendentiousness — represented for Teige not a form of bondage or loss of freedom but rather a liberation from the confines of the merely individual truths in which bourgeois artists remained trapped by their negative conception of freedom.

As with the category of *lidovost*, therefore, Teige's understanding of *tendence* grew out of Proletkult doctrine but simultaneously opened up a distinctly avant-gardist perspective through its emphasis on the '*reciprocal dependence and connection of art and life*'. The social engagement of art was translated into the merging of art and everyday life; tendentiousness functioned as a codeword for overcoming the autonomy of art.

But this early usage of *tendence* exerted a more specific influence on Teige's shift to an avant-garde programme as well — an influence that would have extraordinary consequences. By focusing attention on the manner in which art operates and on the criteria for judging art's relevance or effectiveness, the concept of *tendence* led Teige towards what soon became for him a fundamental theoretical concern: art as *function*.<sup>48</sup> Teige translated the term *tendence* into a measure of the

46 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', p. 33. This argument over the freedom of the artist in relation to Proletarian Art began with the critic Arne Novák's criticism of the text 'Proletářské umění'. Wolker responded with an argument similar to Teige's quoted above; see Jiří Wolker, 'Ochránci umělecké svobody' [The Defenders of Artistic Freedom, 1922], in *Spisy Jiřího Wolkyra*, Vol. II: *Próza a divadelní hry*, ed. by Jan Řezáč and Vladimír Reis (Prague: SNKLHU, 1954), pp. 238–40.

47 Teige, 'Nové umění proletářské', pp. 33–34. Teige's emphasis.

48 See Jan Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači: K otázce sepětí řádu umění a života v české poezii první poloviny 20. století* (Prague: Dauphin, 2007), pp. 122–24.

adequacy of art as a means of achieving its particular end: ‘The tendentiousness of modern art is given by its *purposefulness* [účelnost]’.<sup>49</sup> This equation of tendentiousness with purposefulness allowed Teige to view the apparently unavoidable dilemma of choosing between either socially uncommitted *l’art pour l’art* or socially dogmatic tendentious art as a false dilemma: both options were misguided due to their misunderstanding of the proper purpose (*účel*) or function of art. He wrote that the period following the French Revolution saw the emergence of

art that was ideological, literary and content-based, anecdotal and thematically tendentious [...]. Such ideological art is of course a flagrant anachronism in present times; even if its tendentiousness is of the most revolutionary socialist character still it was born of the petit-bourgeois spirit that, uncomprehending of the modern requirement for specialization and division of labour, and not confronting the question of its own purposefulness [účelností], demands of art something that is not in its nature, that is not its *function*, something that can be provided to the public far better by proselytizing, by a lecture, a sermon, a sociological study, or a journalistic opinion piece, than by the painter’s brush or the sculptor’s chisel.<sup>50</sup>

Soon the term *tendence* became decisively derogatory for Teige, and the positive role originally assigned to the category of tendentiousness was transferred entirely to the term ‘function’: ‘[art] does not have any *tendence* at all — it does, however, have a certain natural function that is integral to it’.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, Teige now associated *tendence* in its usual sense with anti-functional ornamentation, stating for example that *tendence* ‘is as inappropriate to a poem as ornamentation is to a chair or lamp’.<sup>52</sup> When he did still use the term *tendence* he did so tendentiously, so to speak, giving it the sense of the functional purity he now emphasized: ‘a poem or image must be a tendentious reality in and of itself, in integral fashion [*integrálně*]; its *tendence* is then in-born, necessary, unambiguous. [...] To force *tendence* upon a poem, a novel, a sculpture or a picture in external, inorganic fashion is just as foolish as decorating the bare, functional, beautiful form of an aeroplane hangar with national bunting’.<sup>53</sup> Teige’s move away from Proletarian Art and towards the precepts of international Constructivism thus occurred through a conceptual shift that saw tendentiousness equated first with social engagement, then with aesthetic purposefulness, and finally with function.

This developmental logic constitutes an important and under-acknowledged factor in the rapid consolidation of Constructivism as a major orientation point for Teige and for the Czech avant-garde.<sup>54</sup> The external influences on Teige’s formu-

49 Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’, p. 378. Emphasis in original. This passage appears in Fig. 3.2.

50 Teige, ‘Doba a umění’, p. 36. Emphasis in original.

51 Ibid., p. 45.

52 Karel Teige, ‘Naše základna a naše cesta’ [Our Foundation and Our Path, 1924], in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 1, 607–18 (p. 613).

53 Teige, ‘Umění dnes a zítra’, pp. 378–79. This reformulation of *tendence* as function was emphasized at the same time in F. X. Šalda’s statements in support of Devětsil: ‘All [great] art has been tendentious in this sense, that is, driven by the will and longing to serve a vital function’; F. X. Šalda, ‘Literární anketa o nejmladších’, in Šalda, *Soubor díla F. X. Šaldy*, xx1, 68–73 (p. 71).

54 Wiendl argues that this shift in the conception of *tendence* opens the door towards Poetism; see

lation of Constructivism are well known: Le Corbusier (whom Teige met during his visit to Paris in mid-1922), Soviet Constructivism (and the variants of international Constructivism gaining currency in Germany and elsewhere in the course of 1922), Roman Jakobson (not only for his mediation of Russian avant-garde poetry after his arrival in Prague but also for his concern with the specific function of poetic as opposed to ordinary language), and, later, the Prague Linguistic Circle (although Teige's relationship to Mukařovský, as noted above, was one of mutual influence). But these external influences did not descend upon the early Teige as some sort of *deus ex machina* instigating a radical conceptual reversal, nor did Teige simply seize on fashionable trends from abroad. Rather, these influences reinforced and channelled a development that was already taking place in his thought.<sup>55</sup>

The double evolution traced above — from *lidovost* to mass culture, and from *tendence* to functionalism — must be borne in mind when examining Teige's 'high avant-gardist' formulations of the mid-twenties onwards. The two early terms clearly foreshadow characteristic tensions within Teige's later thought: functionalism posited the seamless integration of use value and aesthetic value, while mass culture attracted Teige precisely due to its absence of any ulterior utility, to the anti-instrumentality of its entertainment value. (Teige would later become much more aware of mass culture's utility value for those controlling the culture industry, but this critical moment was absent in his earlier reflections.) The early pairing of *tendence* and *lidovost* thus anticipates the familiar later dualism of Constructivism and Poetism, with all of its internal logical tensions (in particular the conflict between rational and irrational models of modern culture). When only external influences on Teige's thought are taken into account, the Constructivism–Poetism dualism easily appears, and has often been interpreted as, wilful or forced, as if Teige simply wished to accommodate as many of the foreign trends he deemed important as possible. The embryonic form of the dualism examined above, however, provides insight into how Teige saw these apparently contradictory sides of his thought fitting together. The gap separating goal-orientated functionalism from anti-instrumental eudaemonism was not nearly as important for him as the shared nature of these two phenomena as *unavoidable* aspects of modern life. That unavoidability is what rendered them tools to uncover the integral historical identity of the present moment. In the case of functionalism this logic is clear: functionalism responded to physical and economic realities and manipulated them to the engineer's advantage. Functionalism thus respected the coercions that present-day material reality imposed, rather than denying them. But for the early Teige mass culture represented no less a coercive force. The response it provoked among the populace was spontaneous, the attraction it exerted was undeniable and unavoidable: in this sense laughter represented a reality just as compelling as reinforced steel. Teige perceived the unavoidability of these two forces as the guarantor of their truth.

Wiendl, *Vizionáři a vyznavači*, p. 123. Ultimately this is true as well, though I would maintain that Teige's adoption of Constructivism occurs prior to his formulation of Poetism.

<sup>55</sup> This is of course in addition to significant Czech influences, such as the early proto-constructivist texts of Šalda discussed in the next chapter. See Brousek, *Der Poetismus*, p. 103.

Modern life, he felt, was revealing its specific, immanent forms and compelling the adoption and celebration of a lifestyle appropriate to a radically changed era.

For Teige, function and felicitology both emerged from uncompromising engagement with modern reality. This ideal of direct engagement, of integration with the immanent shapes of modern life united Teige's theoretical endeavours from the early statements on tendentious Proletarian Art to the critique of aesthetic autonomy that by the mid-twenties placed him squarely within the mainstream of the contemporary European avant-garde. For this reason Teige's Proletarian Art stage must not be interpreted simply through the lens of historical contingency, that is, as a remnant of the 'regressive' politicization of culture in the Czech lands before the fall of the Habsburgs, and thus merely as cultural baggage that Teige needed to sift through and shed before he was able to emerge unburdened as a progressive spokesperson of the international avant-garde. Nor should Teige's ability in these early years to shift quickly from one position to its diametrical opposite be dismissed simply as youthful whimsy; the logic he followed was too consistent for such an explanation to be satisfying. Rather, Teige seized upon a logical potential lying dormant within the ideological structure of Proletarian Art, a potential that the later battle lines of modernist cultural politics has made seem startling. But points of conflict are also points of contact, and the logic of Teige's 'inconsistency' reveals how thin can be the line of separation between modernism and its Others.

