Kusama’s rendering is Wonderland seen firsthand through Alice’s eyes and interpreted as if through her imagination. — Yvessa Hendeles

YVETTE ALAIN BOIS
Devlin Forre’s Reality After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature (Mif Press) so completely reshuffles the deck of the antimodernist recap and verre sweeping through all cultural practices in Europe in the 1920s and ’30s—from Picasso’s neoclassicism and Matisse’s Nice period to “socialist realism” in Russia—that the reader will barely notice its geographic confinement to Germany. But once discerned, the book’s concerted focus will presumably only elicit calls for other studies expanding Forre’s innovative model into other regions where this widespread cultural phenomenon took place, such as France, Italy, and Russia.

Forre demonstrates with brio that the so-called “return to order” was not at all a reawakening of the clock, nor a simple return to the classical humanism and anthropocentrism that had been programmatically eschewed by the radical experiments of the historical avant-gardes (abstraction, readymade, sound poetry, fluid films and theatrical productions, montage, etc.). There is indeed something like a “return of man” in the works analyzed here, but this man is no longer the individualist subject he had been before the advent of modernism and the catastrophe of World War I. In fact, the new subject put forth by the artists and writers addressed by Forre is deprived of agency, its body bereft of integrity. Drawing from the anthropological
Realism After Modernism shows that if the "new man" envisioned in the figurative practices of Weimar Germany might seem at the center of the universe, he is in fact a prophetic man: a more organ of that universe. — Yve-Alain Bois

discourse of the interwar period, Fore shows that if the "new man" envisioned in the figurative practices of Weimar Germany might seem at the center of the universe, he is in fact a prophetic man: He has become a more organ of that universe, which is now fully one of techniques and media. Fore's conclusion resonates powerfully with our own historical status in the Internet age and indeed the interwar discourses he engages are finding surprising echoes in current anthropology and media studies.

Aside from this anthropological bent, Fore's greatest innovation is to treat his material not thematically but structurally, as it were—which is what allows him to dismantle the simple opposition of "figurative-tractionary" vs. "abstract-modernist-revolutionary," a paradigm to whose seduction many of us (myself included) have succumbed at one point or another, particularly when dealing with the work of the Russian avant-garde. In five different case studies, each concerning a different medium (plus an epilogue dealing with the "long" period, devoted to Ernst Junger's 1957 science-fiction novel The Glass Bead), Fore examines the deep structures at work in a whole range of artistic and literary productions—revealing along the way that, beyond superficial differences accounting for their medium specificity, those structures are eerily similar. From the reverse perspective of Linôhi Moholy-Nagy to the "gestus" of Bechhd's theater, from the involved autobiographies of Carl Einstein to the physiognomist endeavor of John Heartfield's work, each involves not a return to premodernist tropes, but a parody of them: a parody that—contradicting from within the manifest claims to a rehumanization of art—becomes itself the seeds of radical critique.

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GEORFF DYER

How quickly we take the unprecedented for granted! I'd never come across anything like Roberto Calasso's The Rain of Kashch (1983/94) and The Marriage of Calixto and Harmony (1988/93) when I read them in translation in the late 1990s. Calvino said of Kashch that it "takes up two subjects: the first is Talleyrand, and the second is everything else." The Marriage was about the origins of everything—i.e., the Greek myths. Then, with Ka (1996/98), Calasso tried something even more ambitious: a creative retelling of the Indian myths. I felt compelled to read every page of Ka, even the ones that were unbearable. There followed volumes, in a similarly imaginative-critical-discursive style and form, on Kafka and Tiepolo. Calasso never offers what this book is about: and introductions or how-to-read prefaces. Chucked into his work's midst, we have to fend for ourselves. It's like learning how to read and worrying that you're getting sucked, all at once.

His new study, La Folie Baudelaire (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), translated from Italian by Alastair McEwen, offers his signature combination of outright brilliance and intellectual bravado by interposing with sketches of flanmias and Feuvoirl. Baudelaire and his writing on art, particularly his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life," are the starting points for swiveling evocations of the structure of feeling that was taking visual shape in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. There are discussions of Ingres ("Had it not been for Ingres, the nineteenth century would seem even more desperately nineteenth century, docked of that metallic and abrupt light of his"), Manet, Delsacro, and Degas. Of Degas's The Bellelli Family, 1858–67, Calasso observes that the artist "wanted to paint—and stubbornly perfected—the portrait of a family united by reciprocal aversions. But it's not the oddness of the spatial arrangement that hints at a psychological state. It is psychological tension used to attain a spatial revelation: the absence of a center." If asked to deliver a capsule summary of Calasso's thesis, I wouldn't know where to start (or stop). This is not just a sign of the reader's mental infirmity: Calasso's books are never reducible to synopsis; they are worlds to be experienced, to wander around and get lost in. At the same time, they are maps of their own design and purpose. Works of art, in other words.

GEORFF DYER is the author of four novels and two collections of essays. HIS MOST RECENT BOOK, JOHN APHELION (2012), IS A STUDY OF INGRID BERGMANN'S 1979 FILM STALINAL. (SEE COVER FEATURE.)

EWA LADER-BURCHARTH

The dictionary—pluralizing, heterogeneous, notherarchical—was one of the favored forms through which the eighteenth century sought to understand itself. An A-to-Z organizational structure is thus eminently suited to a book that attempts nothing less than a canvassing of the Enlightenment imagination. The alphabetized compendium 1740, Un Abrégé du Monde was published in 1740, A Summary of the World: Knowledge and Collections in the Time of Demailier d'Argenvile; Fage Editions undertakes such an enterprise, offering entries on a range of ideas, images, people, and things