



‘...and Miraculously *Post-Modern* Became *Ost-Modern*’: How *On or About* 1910 and 1924 Karel Čapek Helped to Add and Strike off the ‘P’¹

Verita SRIRATANA

PhD, Assistant Professor
Chulalongkorn University,
Department of English, Faculty of Arts
e-mail: verita.s@chula.ac.th

Abstract. Virginia Woolf and Karel Čapek produced direct responses to the British Empire Exhibition in the forms of – in Woolf’s case – a scathing essay entitled ‘Thunder at Wembley’ and – in Čapek’s case – a (*P*)*Ost*Modernist travelogue later published as part of ‘Letters from England’ translated into English in 1925 and banned by the Nazis as well as the Communists. This research paper juxtaposes modernity in Central Europe with its ‘Other’ – that in Western Europe – by exploring Woolf and Čapek’s *durée réelle* between 1910 and 1924. It offers an analysis of Karel Čapek’s (*P*)*Ost*Modern legacies, placing Prague right on the modernist centre stage. The socio-political contribution of Central European regional modernism in Čapek’s work is increasingly vital to the contemporary Europe of Brexit and refugee and migrant crises, and beyond.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Karel Čapek, British Empire Exhibition, modernism, postcolonialism

1 This research paper would not have been possible without the support of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, in the form of *Grant for Presentation of Research Abroad*, which enabled me to present a rough draft of this paper at *Modern Capitals and Historical Peripheries: Central Europe from the Perspective of Contested Modernities* International Conference at the Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary, on 20–21 October 2017. I dedicate this paper to all students in my 2202350 Selected Topics in English Literature – Consumable Modernisms: Food, Drinks, and Merchandise in Modernist Literature class of 2018.

Introduction: On or About 1910 and 1924 in London and in Prague

In an unsent letter dated 10 November 1989 to his muse, April Gifford, an American scholar of Czech studies who had lovingly been given the nickname of ‘Dubenka’ (‘Duben’ means ‘oak month’, or ‘April’ in the Czech language) (Konrád 2014), Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997) recounts his meeting with Susan Sontag (1933–2004) in New York, where they ‘played a kind of literary ping-pong together’ (Hrabal 2014: 83). The rule of this game was for each of them to take turns saying ‘the names of writers and artists from the East’ (ibid.). It went on and on, with the annunciation of the names of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), Franz Kafka (1883–1924), and Philip Roth (1933–2018), among many others (Hrabal 2014: 83–84). This led to the revelation that the momentous changes which shaped and propelled the aesthetic and intellectual movement known as modernism, as well as its continuation/aftermath, did not take place in the context and metropolises of Western Europe but rather in those of Central and Eastern Europe. Hrabal’s intellectual duel with Sontag ended with a poignant conclusion: ‘And we rejoiced that, indeed, all you had to do was strike off the P, and miraculously *Post-Modern* became *Ost-Modern*... Then I clasped my head and exclaimed, But [sic] we totally forgot that other *Ost-Modern*... Andy Warhol...’ (Hrabal 2014: 84). I propose in this paper that, in the pantheon of the names pronounced and consecrated in the *OstModern* match between two great minds, Karel Čapek (1890–1938) deserves his place as one of the first writers who helped to add and strike off the ‘P’ in ‘*POstmodernism*’. He did so as early as ‘on or about’ 1910 and 1924, to appropriate the (in)famous (anti-)manifesto posited by Virginia Woolf (1882–1941): ‘on or about December 1910 human character changed’ (Woolf 2009a: 38), widely discussed among scholars of High Modernism. However, Woolf’s ‘on or about’ (anti-)maxim was not articulated in the year 1910 but in the year 1924 in a piece with the title of ‘Character in Fiction’ published in the July issue of *The Criterion*, a journal edited by Hrabal’s literary idol, T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), and in the subsequent piece with the title of ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ published on 30 October 1924 by the Hogarth Press as the first number within the first Hogarth Essays series, which ran from 1924 to 1926. Hence, 1924 can also be regarded as an important modernist year. Though Čapek and Woolf never sat down to a conversation in the way that Hrabal and Sontag did, their paths nevertheless crossed not only ‘on or about’ 1924, but also ‘at and around’ such unexpected place as the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, the largest ‘theme park’ ever constructed in the history of Imperial spectacle. Among the visitors at the event, which had been meticulously planned to promote the British Empire’s image and boost Britain’s economy, were 42-year-old Virginia and 34-year-old Karel. Both writers produced criticisms of and direct

responses to the exhibition in the forms of – in Woolf’s case – a scathing essay entitled ‘Thunder at Wembley’, which has now become the quintessential work of postcolonial modernism, and – in Čapek’s case – a (P)OstModernist travelogue later published as part of ‘Letters from England’ [*Anglické listy*, in Czech], which would be translated into English in 1925 and banned by the Nazis as well as the Communists. This paper juxtaposes modernity in Central Europe with its ‘Other’ – that in Western Europe – by exploring Woolf and Čapek’s *durée réelle* between 1910 and 1924. It offers an analysis of Čapek’s (P)Ost-Modern legacies, placing Prague right on the modernist centre stage.

1910 was a significant year for Anglophone modernists (or ‘West-Moderns’, if you will), mainly because of Virginia Woolf’s landmark quotation. For Terry Eagleton, Woolf’s statement marks a transitional stage in the (re)conceptualization of selfhood: ‘One might claim that with modernism it was not so much that human character changed, but that the form of historical selfhood traditionally known as “character” gave way to that rather more elusive phenomenon known as the subject’ (Eagleton 2014: 86). Woolf’s (anti)manifesto is the kind which also manifests itself in the process of becoming. If a manifesto is based on and is meant to propagate absolutism and essentialism, (post)modernism – with its multiplicity and diversity – seeks to disrupt, dismantle, and ‘(re)make it [manifesto] new’.² The reinvention of selfhood not as a flat monolithic ‘self’ but, rather, as one of the performative characters or subjectivities transpires in an event in 1910, which may or may not – but still worthy to note – inspire the playful ‘on or about’ quotation: The Dreadnought Hoax, a prank which took place on 7 February 1910 and where Virginia Stephen and her group of friends, disguised as Abyssinian royals, successfully fooled the Royal Navy into giving them a tour on the battleship HMS Dreadnought. The fake identities and audacious performativity intended to topple the nationalist and militarist ideologies promoted by the British Navy may have formed Woolf’s view of a human character transformed and in flux. Another 1910 event, which was equally ground-breaking, in terms of a ‘culture-quake’, was an exhibition entitled ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ held by Woolf’s friend, Roger Fry (1866–1934), at London’s Grafton Galleries. The exhibition introduced the Anglophone art world to the work of Van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), among many others. The reception was a disaster. The exhibition’s secretary, Desmond MacCarthy (1877–1952), commented: ‘Kind people called him [Roger Fry] mad, and reminded others that his wife was in an asylum. The majority declared him to be a subverter of morals and art, and a blatant self-advertiser....’ (MacCarthy

2 I have appropriated this term from Ezra Pound’s dictum ‘make it new’ (Pound 1935): ‘“Make it new”, Ezra Pound proclaimed. In this revolution, words were set free from syntax, notes from traditional harmonies and colour and line from perspective. Dramatic works became musical and music became visual, and writings became sculptural’ (Make It New 2003).

1995: 78). Nevertheless, both Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf, who wrote ‘how serious a matter it is when the tools of one generation are useless for the next’ (Woolf 2009: 48), perceived this exhibition to be the modern tool or technology of their own generation.

To understand how Karel Čapek helped to create and ‘strike off the P’ (Hrabal 2014: 84) in ‘postmodernism’, one would need to travel to Prague, then still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on or about 1910. In the Central European capital of cubism, the utopian vision of a modern independent nation, later materialized into the post-war establishment of the democratic state of Czechoslovakia in 1918, was described by Bohumil Kubišta (1884–1918), a Czech painter and art critic deemed one of the founders of Czech modern painting, as follows: ‘It is a lie and a simple falsehood for anyone to claim that the modern age is fragmented and disunified, that it does not have a firm spiritual foundation, that it is unstable and volatile, and that modern man does not have solid ground on which to base his worldview’ (Kubišta 1992: 90). Guillaume Apollinaire’s 1914 remarks published in *The Paris Journal* that ‘the Czechs have moved to the forefront of the modernist movement [‘les Tchèques ont pris la tête de Mouvement Moderne’] (Apollinaire 1996: 83) reveal that cubism thrived in Prague. The pinnacle of avant-gardism in Czechoslovak art can be seen in the largest exhibition of cubist art in Prague, the ‘[Survey of] Modern Arts [Moderní umění]’ exhibition, held at the Mánes Exhibition Hall in February 1914. This exhibition, of which the motivation renders it the counterpart the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London, was organized by Alexandre Mercereau (1884–1945), a French Symbolist poet, in collaboration with the Čapek brothers: Josef and Karel. Josef Čapek (1887–1945), a painter and writer, was the person who invented the word ‘robot’,³ and his younger brother Karel, the better-known writer, introduced this word to the public through his 1920 play entitled *RUR*, which stands for ‘Rossum’s Universal Robots’.

As on or about 1910 was a significant modernist duration, on or about 1924 was also momentous. As mentioned earlier, Virginia Woolf’s 1910 quotation was originally published not in the year 1910 but in the year 1924, as part of a piece called ‘Character in Fiction’ in *The Criterion* and republished as an essay entitled ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’ and published by the Hogarth Press. In the life and writing of Karel Čapek on or about 1924, he would also experience a particular change in human character during his trip to Britain and, particularly, during his visit to his intended destination and main purpose of his travels: the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley.

3 According to Darko Suvin, in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, ‘robot’ comes from the word ‘*robota*, meaning ‘drudgery’ with strong feudal connotations of the serf’s compulsory work on the master’s property –’ (Suvin 1979: 270).

The Roaring Thunder at an Overgrown Bazaar: Woolf, Čapek, and Wembley

In this section, I shall offer a juxtaposition of modernity in Central Europe and its 'Other' – that in Western Europe – through textual analysis of the review pieces written by two writers who visited the same exhibition: one writing from the seat of a waning empire and the other writing as a traveller from a young nation, Europe's periphery, which had just emerged from the shadow of imperialist Austro-Hungarian rule. Čapek's acute awareness of his status and position as an outsider looking into the (re)presentation of the British Empire is resonant in the following passage: 'Bear me homeward, Flying Scotsman, splendid hundred-and-fifty-ton locomotive; carry me across the seas, O white and glittering ship; there will I sit down on the rough field-edge where the wild thyme grows, and I will close my eyes, for I am of peasant blood and have been somewhat disturbed by what I have seen' (Čapek 1945: 66).

Positioning himself as a writer 'of peasant blood' (Čapek 1945: 66) who observes the carefully planned and constructed large-scale propaganda project of the British Empire renders a sense of irony belonging to a visitor who is concerned and upset with the illusion of the Empire and the labouring people which it subsumes. I shall return to this point in my textual analysis.

As mentioned in this article's introduction, the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley was the largest 'theme park' ever constructed to promote the glory of the British Empire. The exhibition was ceremoniously inaugurated by King George V on 23 April, the auspicious St George's Day. This symbolic gesture was a tiny part of the event's meticulous planning and large-scale propaganda which aimed at boosting the British Empire's image. The irony is remarkable. The year 1924 appeared, only in theory, to be the zenith of the British Empire. While it is true that Britain had been on the victorious side of the First World War and had been granted a number of German and Turkish colonies by the League of Nations to govern, British political and economic power had nevertheless been weakened by the four-year atrocities of war. Many postcolonial literary scholars have analysed the exhibition as a cultural event, marked by its ideological purpose of instilling as well as promoting British colonial and nationalist ideologies. However, this was not the whole picture. One must not overlook the mercantile and commercial aspects of an event which cost £12 million to put on and attracted 27 million visitors. The exhibition was located in Wembley, then a suburb of metropolitan London. A map of the exhibition site published for visitors shows the names of the main attractions such as the Palace of Arts, the Palace of Industry, the Palace of Engineering, an amusement park, the British Empire Stadium, separate pavilions for each colony such as India, Burma, Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia, among others. All the important sites at the British Empire Exhibition were linked by a

railway called ‘never-stop’ (Knight–Sabey 1984: 17). The ‘never-stop’ railway was described in a caption to the photograph of two types of train juxtaposed as follows: ‘The “never-stop” system (above) means no waiting at stations; the train slows down to less than two miles an hour. There are no drivers or conductors. Below, the old steam style’ (Knight–Sabey 1984: 17). The organizers even hired ‘natives’ or ‘native-looking’ people as ‘mascots’ to walk around the venues. This insistent verisimilitude can be seen reflected in the following passage extracted from the advertisement narrative in the ‘British Empire Exhibition 1924 Promotional Map’: ‘In a single day he will be able to learn more geography than a year of hard study would teach him’ (British Empire Exhibition 2016). Placing emphasis on the educational purposes and benefit of the British Empire Exhibition, the advertisement serves as a twentieth-century example of Jean Baudrillard’s notion that ethnology is ‘freed from its object, will no longer be circumscribed as an objective science but is applied to all living things and becomes invisible, like an omnipresent fourth dimension, that of the simulacrum’ (Baudrillard 2001: 1737–1738). The British Empire Exhibition is not an exhibition in the literal sense. Rather, it is the proto-ultimate simulacrum, a representation which strives not only to ‘mask or pervert a basic reality’ (simulacrum 2001: 353) of the British Empire but also to create ‘an illusion of absolute reality’ (hyperreality 2001: 192) to the point of ‘almost becoming’ a hyperreality. The ‘almost becoming’ in my statement is significant as the British Empire Exhibition has not reached the stage of ultimate simulacrum like Disneyland, a theme park based on the ‘real unreal’ or the ‘unreal real’, which does not pretend to be real and does not need to abide by the rules of verisimilitude: ‘The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real’ (Baudrillard 2001: 1741). Apart from the overt agenda of museumization of the British Empire, the British Empire Exhibition’s organizers stress in many publications and speeches that the gamut of the exhibition is industry and commerce. Accordingly, an advertisement from the ‘Manchester Guardian Commercial’ (Empire Number) published on 16 October 1924 promotes mainly the Palace of Industry, a significant venue for trade. The Palace of Industry is described as ‘the shop window for the whole Empire’ (Manchester Guardian Commercial 1924: 9). Such mercantile and commercial incentives can be found in the Foreword to the ‘Manchester Guardian Commercial’ (Empire Number), written by James Henry Thomas, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, who served under Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald: ‘It [the British Empire Exhibition] has been the shop window for the whole Empire, and the merchants within the Empire as well as the merchants without the Empire have had an opportunity of seeing the best that the “Store” possesses’ (Manchester Guardian Commercial 1924: 9).

Karel Čapek was born in Malé Svatoňovice, near the Krkonoše mountain range located in the north of present-day Czech Republic, in the year 1890. As a writer,

he is known as editor of two significant Czechoslovak newspapers, ‘Národní listy’ and ‘Lidové noviny’. He was the author of several satirical plays and novels, for example, *RUR* (1920), ‘The Absolute at Large’ (1922) and ‘War with the Newts’ (1937), which propel audience and readers to reflect on themselves and human society. From the time of the Declaration of Independence of the Czechoslovak Nation by Its Provisional Government [Prohlášení nezávislosti československého národa zatímní vládou československou] and the Treaty of Versailles, which helped to establish Czechoslovakia as an independent political entity after the First World War, Čapek collaborated closely with the Czechoslovak government and helped to culturally promote his young country’s image to the world. His close and sustained friendship with President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937) took the form of weekly meetings every Friday evening in a house in Prague which he shared with his brother, Josef. As Hitler’s influence grew, Čapek’s distress increased. The Munich Agreement of 1938 drove Čapek to depression. He was repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature but to no avail (Křivánek 2016: 57–58). Slandorous campaigns against him were organized by the right-wing press. As a result, he sank into depression and his lungs, always weak, became inflamed. On Christmas Day in 1938, nine months before the outbreak of the Second World War, Karel Čapek died of pneumonia. After the Nazi invasion of Prague, which was less than three months after his death, the Nazis, unaware that Čapek had died, came to his house with a warrant for his arrest. Josef Čapek was arrested and later perished in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. The same fate would have awaited Karel had he been alive.

The *durée réelle*, or particular section, of Karel Čapek’s short, tragic yet eventful life, which is the focus of this research paper, is 1924. In May 1924, Čapek went to London for the PEN Congress, and on that occasion he travelled throughout the country from southern England through Wales to Scotland (Křivánek 2016: 32–33). He stayed with his friend Otakar Vočadlo (1895–1974), who worked as Associate Professor of Czech studies at the Institute of Slavic Studies at the University of London in the years 1922–1928. Vočadlo helped to arrange meetings between Čapek and leading British writers, among whom were H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, and G. K. Chesterton (Křivánek 2016: 30–31). Čapek stayed with Vočadlo and his family in Surbiton, Surrey, for some time. He would, after this trip, initiate the foundation of the Czechoslovak PEN Club, a branch of the International PEN Club founded in 1921 in London. He would also become the Czechoslovak PEN club’s chairperson. Čapek’s visit to England was planned towards the end of 1923 though the specific confirmation of his trip came in February 1924. Apart from the PEN club affairs, one would have thought that Čapek’s visit to England was a result of the success of a theatrical production of *RUR* in April 1923 at St Martin’s Theatre, London. However, it was his wish to visit the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, which actually propelled Karel

Čapek to make the trip to London (Vočadlo 1995: 39). The legacy of his visit is an essay entitled ‘The Biggest Samples Fair; or, The British Empire Exhibition’ (Čapek 1945: 62), published in ‘Lidové Noviny’ and later compiled with other essays in the form of ‘Letters from England’. Here, I subscribe to Ivona Misterova’s argument made in her article entitled ‘Letters from England: Views on London and Londoners by Karel Čapek, the Czech “Gentleman Stroller of London Streets”’ that Čapek did not write a traditional travelogue. Rather, he wrote a series of personal and critical reviews of the British Empire Exhibition and of other places, which reflect his position as a writer from the periphery of empires [British Empire and the spectre of Austro-Hungarian Empire] as well as the ‘other’ side of Europe: ‘For Čapek, an objective medium that simply interpreted what he saw was not a priority preferring instead to create a subjectively colorful interpretation unique in its point of view, resilience, and certain level of irony’ (Misterova 2010). Anglophone readers might be more familiar with Virginia Woolf’s critical review, reflecting her position as a writer writing from the centre of power, which was given the astounding title of ‘Thunder at Wembley’. In this satirical piece, Woolf construes a fictional thunderstorm which dismantles the British Empire Exhibition, along with the imperialist discourse it propagates: ‘Dust swirls down the avenues, hisses and hurries like erected cobras round the corners. Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in a spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates’ (Woolf 2009b: 171). Woolf seems to assert in her writing that no matter how well-choreographed the British Empire Exhibition was or claimed it was, one could never escape the inevitable truth that this gigantic imperialist and mercantile propaganda would sooner or later fail as the British Empire itself would soon be dismantled: ‘The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins’ (Woolf 2009: 171). Though Karel Čapek does not imagine climatic catastrophe of any kind in his writing, his review similarly puts forward satirical descriptions of the vulnerability of pomp and ceremony, as well as heroism, which sustain imperialism: ‘I even had the luck to behold a statue of the Prince of Wales, made of Canadian butter, and it filled me with regret that the majority of London monuments are not also made of butter’ (Čapek 1945: 63). If one subscribes to Mike Featherstone, who proposes that postmodernism entails ‘the effacement of the boundary between art and every life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture;... parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface “depthlessness” or culture’ (Featherstone 1988: 203), then Čapek’s comments reflect such postmodernist playful tendency to ridicule the discourses behind the rectification of statues and monuments as markers of history and high culture. His comments, an ironic celebration of butter(y) statues/monuments, anticipate the likes of Jean Baudrillard, who states that images of god, or statues of heroes, have ‘murderous capacity’ (Baudrillard

2001: 1735) in that they can be 'murderers of the real' (Baudrillard 2001: 1735). Statues carry illusive meaning which represents aesthetic values to the point that vandalizing them is barbaric. Here, Čapek invites us to imagine the decay of statues and monuments in London in the image of melting 'butter statues/monuments', a metaphor for oppressive social discourses and ideologies which, in the crumbling order of heroism and Empire, are equally 'buttery' and prone to dissolution. In this case, the hyperreal, or the narrative of the glorification of history and prominent figures, which has become 'all too real', such as the Prince of Wales statue in the Canadian pavilion, consists of the monarchist as well as colonial and imperialist discourses. Čapek stretches the limit of modernity by inviting us to ask the following question: Could it be that the simulacrum which many worship and perceive as the hyperreality of imperial glory is as slippery and meltable as butter? Buttery statues, as well as their buttery meanings, are not the only items at the exhibition and beyond which Čapek deconstructs in his writing. His description of the throats and dried ears of the gentlemen and ladies who visited the exhibition serve, in its reversal of the 'gaze', to subvert the purpose of the exposition of goods from the colonial peripheries (Čapek 1945: 63). He dehumanizes the gazing and gaping participants of the British Empire Exhibition in the same way that the imperial discourses seek to dehumanize the colonized subjects and reduce them to mere commodities.

Čapek goes as far as undermining the museumization function of the British Empire Exhibition and reducing the vast expanse of the exhibition to mere 'commercial cornucopia' (Čapek 1945: 63) and even 'overgrown bazaar' (Čapek 1945: 64). His scathing remarks form a stark contrast to the grandiosity reflected in the exact wordings on the British Empire Exhibition promotional materials, which give the impression that this exposition of goods from the colonial territories offers an educational experience where visitors are able to study the conditions of life lived in the colonies and to accumulate cartographic information of the world: 'In a single day he will be able to learn more geography than a year of hard study would teach him' (British Empire Exhibition 2016). In Čapek's essay, the grandiosity of the 'grand tour' is reduced to only a 'regular tour' through a vast and gigantic marketplace. The scale of the British Empire Exhibition is acknowledged and accentuated by Čapek, reflecting his 'powerlessness' not only as a thorough reviewer of the event but also as an outsider or observer who does not share with the British people their heritage of the British Empire. He seems to be in awe more with the expanse of the goods 'fair' (Čapek 1945: 64) than with the glory of the British Empire, of which presentation and ardent promotion were carefully staged and staunchly supported.

Karel Čapek – The *Ost*Modern and The *Post*Modern

If one subscribes to Fredric Jameson's argument that postmodernism is 'the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture' (Jameson 1998: 2), one probably subscribes to the notion that postmodernism resists totalization, particularly with regard to the authority to speak for the 'other'. Karel Čapek's views and writing anticipate thinkers like Linda Hutcheon who in *The 'Politics of Postmodernism'* not only examines the postmodernist radical tendency to question and challenge modernity's authoritative representation of 'the other', particularly society's minority, but also analyses postmodernism's dangerous tendency to ghettoize or valorize marginality and peripheries – which she sees as no different from the traditional form of domination: 'The ex-centric "other" itself may have different (and less complicitous) modes of representation and may therefore require different methods of study' (Hutcheon 2002: 36). Čapek was, again, ahead of his time. For Čapek, the British Empire Exhibition, as well as the imperialist worldview it propagates, reduces the human being into an abstraction inferior to the industry, commodity, and technology put on display at the exhibition. By exposing the British Empire and its 1924 exhibition project's disregard for the 'invisible', albeit imaginatively 'coloured' (Čapek 1945: 69), hands of labour from the colonies which made and (up)held the exhibited merchandises, Čapek's satirical comments anticipate the likes of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who developed the concept of 'epistemic violence' – the systematic 'othering' through the sanitization and race and history, repackaged in this British Empire Exhibition as carried out for the love of knowledge and fellow humankind. Spivak wrote: 'Until very recently, the clearest available example of such epistemic violence was the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other' (Spivak 2001: 2197). On the surface, Čapek may seem to contribute to the 'persistent constitution of the [colonized] Other as the [colonial] Self's shadow' (Spivak 2001: 2197). However, what does this make of him and his subject position as a 'colonial colonized', or a 'colonized colonial'? The labels 'self' and 'other' are rendered porous when he brings in his *Ost*Modern narrative, propelling the readers to see that he, too, can be complicit in the silencing of anonymous labourers of the Empire as well as integral to 'the terrible silence of the four hundred millions' (Čapek 1945: 70). Thus, Karel Čapek ends his essay with a (P)*Ost*modern juxtaposition, that is, if one agrees with Featherstone, who propounds that 'postmodernism is perceived as a heightening of the adversarial tendencies of modernism with desire, the instinctual, and pleasure unleashed to carry the logic of modernism to its furthest reaches..., exacerbating the structural tensions of society and disjunction of the realism' (Featherstone 1988: 203–204). Čapek compares and contrasts the British Empire

Exhibition at Wembley with his childhood town in Czechoslovakia, formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

I should like to be tiny, and to stand once more in old Prouza’s shop at Upice, to stare, goggle-eyed, at the black gingerbread, the pepper, the ginger, the vanilla and the laurel leaves, and to think to myself that these are all the treasures of the world and the scents of Arabia and all the spices of distant lands, to be amazed, to sniff and then to run off and read a novel by Jules Verne about strange, distant and rare regions. For I, foolish soul, used to have quite a wrong idea of them. (Čapek 1945: 71–72)

By stating that he would rather return to Upice, to his childhood space and days when he knew nothing about such huge bazaar which sustains and peddles depthless imperialist fetish, Čapek satirizes the exhibition’s pretentious claim to reality of, as well as the condition of life in, the colonial countries. Reading Jules Verne’s adventure novels – he seems to claim – is more nourishing to the imagination and less oppressive to the silenced lives exploited by the rhetoric of the Empire than unquestioningly subscribing to and propagating the myth of the British Empire. If his essay can be read as a cautionary tale against the dangers of epistemic violence, Čapek can be regarded as the child in ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’, Hans Christian Andersen’s famous story, who not only points out but also laughs at the invisible cloak which the new Emperor of liberalism and humanism pretends he does not notice.

The Central European experience, permeating throughout Čapek’s writing, produces an impact beyond his strong patriotism, which Misterova has already pointed out: ‘Čapek’s analogies and contrasts between foreign and domestic are not limited only to landscape and scenery or places close to his heart, as he also empathetically puts himself in the place of his countrymen’. I nevertheless argue that, apart from ‘his countrymen’ (Misterova 2010), Čapek sympathetically puts himself in the place of the diverse ‘other’.⁴ This ‘other’ is not an exoticized entity but, rather, a ‘strategically essentialized’⁵ concept, as Čapek also acknowledges how he can only touch the surface of the ‘spirit of the four hundred million’ (Čapek

4 Similarly, in ‘Thunder at Wembley’, Virginia Woolf also puts herself in the position of the other, a thrush. She provides a bird’s eye view of the disruptive presence of a silent anonymous individual whose real day-to-day existence points towards the artificiality and absurdity of the British Empire Exhibition: ‘And then some woman in the row of red-brick villas outside the grounds comes out and wrings a dish-cloth in her backyard. All this the Duke of Devonshire should have prevented’ (2009b: 170).

5 ‘Strategic essentialism’, a term introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, means that experience of a social category can be defined and essentialized as long as one is consciously aware that any given fixed entity is only strategic for recognizing the differences within a social category for the sake of political mobilization (see: Strategic Essentialism. In: Ritzer, George–Ryan, Michael J. (eds), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2011: 193).

1945: 70) subalterns missing from the British Empire Exhibition. In other words, the Central European experience contributes to the (*P*)*Ost*Modernist project which aims to defamiliarize received notions and undermine the authority of grand narratives: ‘Perhaps he [Čapek] suggests his country is more beautiful because of its smallness. ... Smallness is spiritual health. This was the lesson Britain failed to learn when it cast off empire but retained the illusion that it was still a great power’ (Carey 2010: xv). How Karel Čapek, the *Ost*Modern and the *Post*Modern, ventures to ‘carry the logic of modernism to its furthest reaches’ (Featherstone 1988: 203), a phrase which, I argue, can also be translated into ‘carry the logic of imperialism as well as consumerism to their furthest reaches’, through his subject position as the Central European other, can be seen in his comments on modernity and technology in his review of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The following passage can be read as an articulation of the prevailing concern that technology cleanses the world from the human condition: ‘Beside you, Flying Scotsman, what would that blind beggar look like who sold me matches today? He was blind and corroded with scabies; he was a very bad and impaired machine; in fact, he was only a man’ (Čapek 1945: 67). It might be worth reading and understanding Čapek’s views through Hannah Arendt’s ‘The Human Condition’, where she categorizes the three fundamental activities of human life: labour, work, and action: ‘The *vita activa*, human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something, is always rooted in a world of men and of man-made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends’ (Arendt 1998: 22). For Arendt, the desire to escape labour through technology has ironically created a society devoted exclusively to labouring. It is this obsession with the routine work and comfort that undermines humans’ capacity to appreciate life in the knowledge that all humans will eventually die, thus limiting their political action. Life conditioned by labour reflects humanity as *animal laborans*: ‘The activity of labor does not need the presence of other, though a being laboring in complete solitude would not be human but an *animal laborans* in the word’s most literal significance’ (Arendt 1998: 22). Life conditioned by work reflects humanity as *homo faber*: ‘The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies – *homo faber* who makes and literally “works upon” as distinguished from the *animal laborans* which labors and “mixes with” – fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice’ (Arendt 1998: 136). Life conditioned by action reflects humanity as *zoon politikon*: ‘Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history’ (Arendt 1998: 8–9). Human beings labouring to leave lasting work for tomorrow, work which will inspire action, indeed, should always be the ruin of propaganda projects like the British Exhibition, which thrive on the fetish of materials and on the eradication of the human condition, human being’s imperfection and mortality included.

Conclusions: Socio-Political Contribution of Central European Regional Modernism

As this comparative paper has shown, reading Virginia Woolf's review of the British Empire Exhibition alongside Karel Čapek's description of the same venue and event, as well as comparing and contrasting these two writers' critiques on the British Empire, has led readers towards a reassessment of the notions of centre and periphery. If Western Europe, which mainly entails anglophone, francophone, and germanophone intellectual and aesthetic heritage and movements, has become emblematic of, to the extent of being synonymous to, Modernism, I argue that the voice, presence, and socio-political contribution of a Central European writer like Čapek help to challenge Western Eurocentric notions of modernism. Čapek puts into question what – to appropriate the term from Scott Herring in 'Regional Modernism: A Reintroduction' – I regard as Western European 'metronormativity' (Herring 2009: 2), or the tendency to conflate modernism with Western European capital cities and thereby reduce modernism's multiplicity, particularly in terms of spatial and historical contexts, to only urban settings in Western Europe. Transcending while paradoxically embracing the boundaries of nation and empire, Čapek gives articulation to a nation emerging from the shadows of its colonial past located in a region which, at first glance, seems 'far from the maddening' radar of British colonization, imperialist projects, and propagandist ventures as reflected in the British Empire Exhibition. Yet, Čapek makes clear that his emerging nation in such an off-the-radar region has ironically been an integral part of imperialism when he puts himself in close proximity with the silenced labour from the British colonies – Spivak's subaltern, who, deprived of access to the 'capital' (in its literal sense of capital city and in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's economic, cultural, and social capital), cannot speak. By specifically referring to his own hometown in a small country located in a forgotten region in his writing, it can be read that Čapek avoids 'speaking for' the anonymous hands which built empires and thereby goes beyond the overgeneralization of colonized experience which Spivak challenges. Like the thunder which Woolf construes, Čapek's sincere prose propels readers to look beyond the façades of exhibition pavilions, beyond the 'spoils' of the empire, beyond the racially imagined bodies which unjustly toiled and see in all clarity – regardless of the particular and different lives we live across time and space – the shared plight of humanity at the mercy of greed, exploitation, and extermination. Such is, I propound, the socio-political contribution of Central European regional modernism in Čapek's work, which is not only valid but also increasingly vital to the contemporary Europe of Brexit and refugee & migrant crises, and beyond.

On or About 2019, Bohumil Hrabal and Susan Sontag would have also agreed.

References

In Czech

- APOLLINAIRE, Guillaume. 1996. Paris Journal (6 March 1914). Cited In: Slavík, Jaroslav–Opelík, Jiří (eds), *Josef Čapek*. Prague: Torst.
- KONRÁD, Daniel. 2014. Lituji, že jsem se nevrátila, říká Hrabalova múza Dubenka. *aktualne.cz*. (28.3.2014). <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/literatura/lituji-ze-jsem-se-nevratila-rika-hrabalova-muza-dubenka/r~b8a5fae0b66611e387f2002590604f2e/>.
- KŘIVÁNEK, Vladimír. 2016. *Svědění Slova: Český PEN Klub v Proměnách Doby*. Praha: České centrum Mezinárodního PEN klubu.
- KUBIŠTA, Bohumil. 1992. O duchové podstatě moderní doby. In: Padrta, Jiří (ed.), *Osmá a Skupina výtvarných umělců, 1907–1917: Teorie, Kritika, Polemika*. Prague: Odeon. [English translation from Ort, Thomas. 2013. *Art and Life in Modernist Prague*. Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan].
- VOČADLO, Otakar. 1995. *Anglické listy Karla Čapka*. Prague: Jan.

In English

- ARENDDT, Hannah. 1998. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Margaret Canovan (intro.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- BAUDRILLARD, Jean. 2001. From *The Precession of Simulacra*. In: Leitch, Vincent B. et alia (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. London–New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1732–1741.
- BRITISH EMPIRE EXHIBITION. 2016 [1924]. <http://www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk>. 13 April 2016. [http://www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk/index/Category:British_Empire_Exhibition_\(1924\)](http://www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk/index/Category:British_Empire_Exhibition_(1924)).
- ČAPEK, Karel. 1945. The Biggest Samples Fair, or The British Empire Exhibition. In: Čapek, Karel: *Letters from England*. Paul Selver (transl.). Frome & London: Butler and Tanner Ltd. 62–72.
- CAREY, John. 2010. Preface. In: Čapek, Karel. *Believe in People: The Essential Karel Čapek*. Šárka Tobrmanová-Kühnová (transl.). London: Faber and Faber. xi–xxxi.
- EAGLETON, Terry. 2014. Vicissitudes of ‘Character’. In: Minow-Pinkney, Makiko. (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and December 1910: Studies in Rhetoric and Context*. Grosmont: Illuminati Books. 83–89.
- FEATHERSTONE, Mike. 1988. In Pursuit of the Postmodern: An Introduction. In: Featherstone, Mike. *Theory, Culture & Society*. Vol. 5. London–Newbury Park–Beverly Hills–New Delhi: Sage. 195–215.

- HERRING, Scott. 2009. Regional Modernism: A Reintroduction. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 55(1 – Spring). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1–10.
- HRABAL, Bohumil. 2014. *Total Fears: Selected Letters to Dubenka*. James Naughton (transl.). Prague: Twisted Spoon Press.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. 2002. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2nd ed. London–New York: Routledge.
- HYPERREALITY. 2001. In: Macey, David. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin Reference. London: Penguin Books. 192–193.
- JAMESON, Fredric. 1998. Postmodernism and Consumer Society. In: Jameson, Frederic. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998*. London: Verso 1–20.
- KNIGHT, Donald R.–Sabey, Alan D. 1984. *Lion Roars at Wembley: British Empire Exhibition, 1924–25*. London: Barnard & Westwood Limited.
- MACCARTHY, Desmond. 1995. The Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910. In: Rosenbaum, S. P. (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*. Revised ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 74–78.
- MAKE IT NEW: The Rise of Modernism Exhibition at Ransom Center Opens Oct. 21. 2003. *Harry Ransom Center*. The University of Texas at Austin. <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/press/releases/2003/nr100903modernism.html>.
- MANCHESTER GUARDIAN Commercial. 1924. Empire Number – II. Thursday 16 October 1924.
- MISTEROVA, Ivona. 2010. *Letters from England: Views on London and Londoners by Karel Capek, the Czech ‘Gentleman Stroller of London Streets’*. *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 8(2 – September). Online at: <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2010/misterova.html>.
- ORT, Thomas. 2013. *Art and Life in Modernist Prague*. Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- POUND, Ezra. 1935. *Make It New: Essays by Ezra Pound*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- RITZER, George–RYAN, Michael J. (eds). 2011. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing.
- SIMULACRUM. 2001. In: Macey, David. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin Reference. London: Penguin Books.
- SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2001. From a Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Chapter 3. History [Can the Subaltern Speak?]. In: Leitch, Vincent B. et alia. (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. London–New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2197–2208.
- SUVIN, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- WOOLF, Virginia. 2009a. Character in Fiction. In: Woolf, Virginia. *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*. David Bradshaw (ed. with introd.). Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 37–54.
- 2009b. Thunder at Wembley. In: Woolf, Virginia. *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*. David Bradshaw (ed. with introd.). Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 169–171.