

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Aesthetics and Politics of Space in Russia and Japan: A Comparative Philosophical Study* by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

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of Siberia's indigenous peoples are in serious threat of extinction. In a further irony, the written literatures of native Siberians, which began less than 100 years ago, and are so brilliantly exemplified by the writers represented in this book, may not survive another generation.

We are grateful that the University of Minnesota Press has made available for us this book, *The Way of Kinship*, without which it would be nearly impossible for English-language readers to have such a close brush with the Siberian environment, the way of life of its indigenous people, and the horrendous obstacles they both face to survive in the twenty-first century.

Gerald E. Mikkelsen, University of Kansas

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein. *Aesthetics and Politics of Space in Russia and Japan: A Comparative Philosophical Study*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. Timeline. Bibliography. Index. xvi + 172 pp. \$62.99 (cloth).

This erudite, expansive book undertakes a study of convergences—as distinct from comparisons—between the aesthetic manifestations and political implications of Russian and Japanese philosophies of space. “Convergence,” the author’s preferred term, is especially felicitous for this particular project, because it is not through the circuits of translation, transmission, or influence that Botz-Bornstein brings together Noh theater and Russian iconography; the Japanese notion of *basho* and the Russian concept of *sobornost'*; Nishida Kitaro’s inter-subjectivity and Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism; and the spatially mediated political and aesthetic agendas of Eurasianism and pan-East-Asianism. To be sure, a good historical case may be made for such analogies arising out of contact between Russian and Japanese thinkers during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but that is not the book’s concern. Rather, the author locates the basis for his juxtapositions in Russia’s and Japan’s analogous, if not coeval, encounters with Western modernity and in the concomitant ontological concern of situating the self and the community.

The introductory chapter preceding the four sections devoted to the four topics listed above makes a convincing case for situating the project itself as a study of convergences rather than parallels. Instead of focusing on the time lag between the emergence of Peter Chaadayev, “the first original philosopher of Russia” in the early nineteenth century, and Nishida Kitaro, “the first original philosopher of Japan” whose foundational text *Zen no Kenkyu* appeared in 1911 (3), Botz-Bornstein suggests that a much more appropriate focal point for his analysis would be around 1901, when “Okakura’s *Ideals of the East* inaugurated the ‘Asian Spiritual Renaissance,’ and 1902, when the Religious-Philosophical Society of St Petersburg was founded by Symbolist writers and idealist philosophers who claimed to inaugurate the ‘Russian Religious-Philosophical Renaissance’” (3). Such a paradigm is much more conducive to the exploration of common “themes” (5) such as All-Unity, particularism (as opposed to universalism), personalism (as opposed to subjectivity), and intuitive immediacy, which constitute some of the strands that run throughout the chapters that follow.

The next chapter takes the reader on a fascinating journey to the concept of the “virtual” through what at first seem to be two incommensurable forms: Noh theater and Russian Orthodox iconography. Botz-Bornstein, however, brilliantly achieves this task through the shared element of spatiality, namely, a refusal of the very category of the real as a point of reference—as opposed to our contemporary conflation of simulacra and virtual reality. In their common abnegation of representation itself, he argues, both the stage of Noh and the frame of the Russian icon become spaces that do not so much refuse perspectivism as construct nothingness. They constitute a totality with no counterpart in lived experience. An analysis of the convergence between Nishida’s notion of *basho* and Semen Frank’s *sobornost'* lies at the center of the following chapter’s interrogation of community spaces. In dialogue with an impressive array of thinkers, ranging from

Kant to Nancy and Bhabha, the author demonstrates how Nishida and Frank contest the “Western” notions of both the individual “I” and the collective “we” as “materialized objects” (59). Instead, *basho* and *sobornost*’ conceive the community in an already multivalent and plural position between the “I” and the “Thou.” The preceding discussion naturally leads to the question of ethics, and indeed the next chapter does not disappoint. Complicating the paradigm of all-unity, the juxtaposition of Nishida’s later works with those of Mikhail Bakhtin reveals both thinkers’ mobilization of form and style in order to present a non-rationalist conception of the subject. Botz-Bornstein delineates the striking convergences between Nishida’s exposition, where, for example, in *I and Thou* “the echo-like encounter of those who are opposed’ becomes the basis of existence,” and Bakhtin’s model of inter-subjectivity, wherein “the individual person manages to exist, at least for a while, in an ‘in-between,’ [...] and negates in this way its biological body in order to become one with ‘the people,’ with mankind, and with the entire cosmos” (82). In the final chapter on Eurasianism, the book brings together its broad concerns with local, national, regional, and global conceptions of space through an examination of the Eurasianist movement in conjunction with Japanese thinkers Watsuji Tetsuro and Nishida. This chapter, which contests the widespread perception of Russian and Japanese philosophies of space as totalitarian (95–96) with particular force, outlines the trajectories through which they transformed traditional notions of communal space into what Botz-Bornstein terms “time-space development” (xi).

*Aesthetics and Politics of Space* is a generative example of recent scholarship engaged in repositioning both Russian and East Asian studies in a dynamic inter-Asian field of comparison or “convergence,” to use Botz-Bornstein’s own term. My only complaint about this very timely monograph is the obvious lack of copy-editing. The argument, as could be expected, is dense, and deserved extremely careful grooming for the audience to navigate through its nuances. As it stands, however, reading the text requires laborious syntactic and grammatical acrobatics even from a reader reasonably well versed in critical theory and at least one of the traditions under consideration.

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Jacob Edmond. *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. Illustrations. Works cited. Index. xv + 272 pp. \$70.00 (cloth); \$26.00 (paper).

In this ambitious and rich work, Jacob Edmond explores the relationship between recent poetry and globalism. Rejecting both the traditional East/West binary and the local/global opposition which he sees as its replacement, Edmond maps out a middle ground—an area of contact and exchange in which seemingly disparate poets pursued a common poetics of strangeness in the post-Cold War years. Through close examination of six Russian, American, and Chinese poets, he argues that their “common concern with strangeness in textual practice, cross-cultural encounter, and transnational affiliation” not only illuminates the poets’ own responses to world historical changes, but, more importantly, helps shape our current conception of globalism and provides an alternative to traditional dichotomous thinking (3).

In the first half of the book, Edmond examines the work of Chinese poet Yang Lian (b. 1955), Russian poet Arkady Dragomoshchenko (1946–2012), and American poet Lyn Hejinian (b. 1941), all of whom wrote in response to personal experiences during the late Cold War period. The second half explores poetic attempts by Bei Dao (Chinese, b. 1949), Dmitry Prigov (Russian, 1940–2007), and Charles Bernstein (American, b. 1950) to reimagine literature and culture on a global scale. This review will focus on the Russian poets and Hejinian, Dragomoshchenko’s translator and collaborator.