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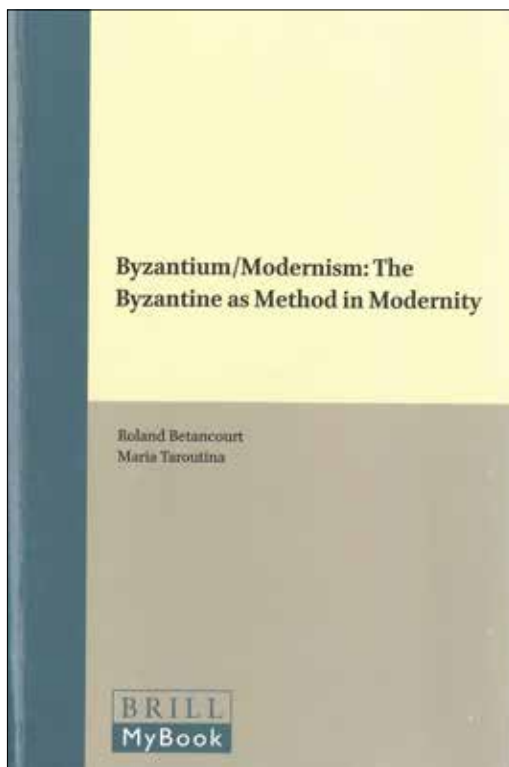
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BYZANTIUM/MODERNISM: THE BYZANTINE AS METHOD IN MODERNITY

Roland Betancourt, Maria Taroutina, eds.

Leiden/Boston: Brill2015 xxiv+369. Index, illustrations.

The essays in this collection, which originated in a conference held at Yale University in April 2012, take us into new and fascinating territory. While the volume does not deal with music, the intersection between the Byzantine and the modern in the visual arts is something that has come increasingly to the fore in recent years (one thinks, for example, of the work of John Bowlt, J.B. Bullen, Rico Frances and Marie-José Mondzain, the latter two contributors here), and as such provides numerous points of comparison with similar phenomena in music.



Maria Taroutina's Introduction to the first half of the book, "Byzantium and Modernism", leads us straight into the middle of the apparent contradiction of Byzantium and Modernism by quoting as her opening Roger Fry's observation that paintings by Signac, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne were the work of "proto-Byzantines". This introduces a speculative discussion of the possible meanings of this phrase and a presentation of the essays included in the volume, the first of which, part of a section entitled "The Avant-Gardes and their Counter-Movements", is Robert S. Nelson's irritatingly punctuated "Modernism's Byzantium Byzantium's Modernism". The irritation stops with the title, however, because Nelson's essay is an absorbing discussion of the possible connections between Klimt's mural for the Palais Stoclet and the acquisition by the owner of the palace of a paten with a central scene depicting the Last Supper in cloisonné enamel, composed, as Nelson notes, "of flat colour planes, if seen with modernist eyes" (p. 20).

He continues this thread, discussing early 20th-century reactions to Byzantine mosaics in Italy, and to San Marco in Venice, and their influence on work by the playwright Sardou, German Expressionists; and, very intriguingly, the influence of the English amateur but thorough Byzantinist Matthew Stewart Prichard on Matisse. The final section deals with the impact of Hagia Sophia on modern architecture, and the concluding lines encapsulate the points previously made: "Rather than being the utter rupture with the past its adherents sometimes proclaimed, the modern movement taught us to see the past through the eyes of its major artists. Byzantine art would never be the same again" (p. 36).

The following chapter, by Myroslava M. Mudrak, is entitled “Kazimir Malevich and the Liturgical Tradition of Eastern Christianity”, and is a penetrating reading of Malevich’s work through the liturgical lens. While Malevich’s “inversion of the icon” (see Oleg Tarasov’s *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* [London: Reaktion 2002] and, for an extension of this notion into the realm of music, my own *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music* [Joensuu: ISOCM/SASA 2014]), is far from unknown, this essay delves deeply into other symbolisms in his work, discovering parallels between his painting and elements of the liturgy – the relating of Malevich’s *The Triumph of Heaven* to the angelology of the liturgical cycle is particularly inspired. One wonders whether such an essay might have enabled reviewers to note the insistent, even almost omnipresent, presence of the symbol of the cross in the work on display in the Tate Modern’s Malevich exhibition in London in 2014...

“Modernism’s Precursors” is the title of the second section of the book, and contains two essays by Dimitra Koutoula and Elena N. Boeck. The former writes on “Arts and Crafts and the ‘Byzantine’: The Greek Connection”, beginning with the the documentation of monuments in Greece and elsewhere from 1888 on by Robert Weir Schultz and Sidney Howard Barnsley, now housed in the Byzantine Research Fund Archive in Athens. The premise is that, during this period, “Byzantium first entered the cultural limelight as a subversive precedent for modernity’s escape from the deathly grip of classicism and the neoclassical values nurtured by the Renaissance” (p. 77), and this is worked out through an examination of the work of the Arts and Crafts Movement in this light. Boeck’s chapter concerns the image of Byzantium in Sardou’s play *Theodora*, first staged in 1884, and which, according to the author, “(...) actively participated in both academic and popular discourses at the time of Byzantium’s modern rediscovery” (p. 102). If “(t)he Theodora of ‘history’ was assassinated by the Sardou-Bernhardt duo well before the curtain finally fell on the performance” (p. 113), the author nevertheless determinedly places the work in a positive perspective, concluding that “(r)ather than scorn Sardou’s play for its warped vision of Byzantium, Byzantinists should embrace it as a didactic example for probing how we, too, frame, claim, and re-frame Byzantium based on our own fashions, scholarly preoccupations, and shifting paradigms” (p. 132). Indeed: this observation could almost stand as a motto for the entire book.

In the third section, “Byzantine Tactics, Modernist Strategies in Architectural Discourse”, Tulay Atak discusses “Abstraction’s Economy: Hagia Sophia in the Imaginary of Modern Architecture” and Robert Ousterhout contributes a chapter called “Byzantine Architecture: A Moving Target?”. While these two chapters complement each other excellently in the ground they cover, which includes projects by Viollet-le-Duc, Loos and Le Corbusier, for example, as well as the “reverse reading” of modernism into Byzantium, it is truly a pity that there is nothing here on attempts to create a Byzantine modernism (or perhaps, in the spirit of this volume, one should say “modern Byzantinism”) such as that of the Serbian architects Momir Korunović and Branko Tanazević in the early 20th century and, extending this observation to the book as a whole, no consideration of similar ideas in wider artistic circles in the countries of the Balkans in which the Byzantine inheritance had, and has, very specific and direct associations.

The second part of the book takes us into trendier territory, Roland Betancourt’s Introduction, “The Slash as Method” both justifying the collection’s title and taking us straight into Barthesian thought. “For the slash”, he says, “has an apophatic function; it attempts to make manifest that space of contact or collision that is inherently ineffable, since it fills the text’s graphic interval, yet denies itself a stable meaning or sonic translation” (p. 179). While the slash may well have such an anti-explicatory function, the contributors to this second half are fortunately more than eloquent, and many surprising and thought-provoking connections are made. In the first section, “Reading across Time: Modern Subjects, Byzantine Objects”, Stratis Papaioannou’s chapter, “Byzantium and the Modernist Subject: The Case of Autobiographical Literature”

looks at Byzantine rhetoric through the prism of later observers and modern philosophical thought, and by to doing to bring it closer to us and render it less opaque. Anthony Cutler's chapter is a highly original and inventive discussion of Byzantine visual structures as reflected in a number of examples of visual work from 20th-century America, including Rauschenberg, De Kooning and even Dr Seuss.

In section 5, "Byzantine New Media: The Photographic and Filmic Icon", Devin Singh provides a remarkable analysis of the "Iconicity of the Photographic Image: Theodore of Stoudios and André Bazin", a theological and philosophical dialogue between these two apparently disparate figures, notably in the resonances of Theodore's *On the Holy Icons* to be found in Bazin's essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", in which, says Singh, he "(...) takes the discourse of the union of the invisible, natural image and works it out in the world, incarnating it, as it were. The personalist and Catholic humanist tradition that influenced Bazin invoked the incarnation as a paradigm for valuing humanity, matter, and creation" (p. 252). Marie-José Mondzain's essay continues the idea of incarnation, in a poetically philosophical-theological reading of Tarkovsky. If at times this seems at times somewhat impenetrable, it is true that her subject is vast – as vast, as she makes clear, as the Incarnation itself – and therefore not susceptible to easy explication.

Three chapters are included in Section 6, a discussion by Jane A. Sharp of Orthodox Christian imagery in the work of Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevich and others, and the cultural commentary embodied therein, an unexpectedly rich study of Lacan and Byzantine art by Rico Franses – whose conclusion "Through the eyes of God, but never seeing anything. How not to see the invisible? Always with eyes wide open" (p. 329) strikes me as one of the most genuinely apophatic statements in the book – and, as a kind of corollary, a wide-ranging essay by Charles Barber entitled "Beyond Representation/The Gift of Sight" that moves from Barthes to St Gregory Palamas, once again confronting modern philosophy and the patristic tradition. Glenn Peers provides a coda, "We Have Never Been Byzantine: On Analogy", built around a discussion of the *Byzantine Things in the World* exhibition at the Menil Collection in 2013.

A remarkable and remarkably wide-ranging collection, then, and one that will provide at least some food for thought for anyone with an interest in the continuing contemporary cultural dialogue with Byzantium. In addition, it provides an essential springboard for further reflection on the themes it addresses, and its methodological breadth is encouraging, if at times disconcerting; but to be disconcerted is often valuable for stimulating thought, and that is one objective that this book accomplishes triumphantly.

Ivan Moody