***The Expressionism Debate*** may refer either to a series of articles / essays written by anti-fascist Marxist writers, philosophers, and theorists in *Das Wort*, a literary journal associated with the German *Volksfront für Frieden, Freiheit und Brot* initiative headed by Heinrich Mann and published in Moscow between 1936 and 1939, or to the larger debate about the ideological underpinnings of an Expressionist (and, more broadly, modernist) aesthetic through the early twentieth century.

In 1934, Georg Luckács published ‘“Grösse” und “Verfall” des Expressionismus’ (The “Greatness” and “Decline” of Expressionism) in the January edition of *Internationale Literatur*, associating Expressionist art and literature with the ‘parasitism’ of fundamentally imperialist notions. He suggested that fascism was an inevitable derivative or outgrowth of Expressionism’s dissociative aesthetics of stylization, which estrange an abstract notion of expression from political socioeconomic reality. Over the next few years, artists and intellectuals such as Gustav von Wangenheim, Adolf Leschnitzer, Herwarth Walden, and Bela Balazs repudiated Luckács’s views; in the September 1937 issue of *Das Wort* Klaus Mann wrote an article condemning Gottfried Benn’s support of the Nazis as well as a betrayal of Expressionist thought. Alfred Kurella of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, on the other hand, agreed with Luckács and asserted that Expressionism was the ‘spiritual child’ of untrammelled capitalism and a forerunner to fascism. In his 1938 essay ‘Discussing Expressionism’ Ernst Bloch articulated a specific and sustained critique of Luckács’s essay, challenging its conclusions and methodology. Luckács responded with ‘Realism in the Balance’, arguing in favour of the realist’s commitment to interpreting (not just depicting or re-creating) fragmentary experience, of perceiving and re-creating instead the ‘true significance’ or ‘totality’ of social reality. Luckács thus shifted the terms of the debate from art in general to literature and from Expressionism to modernism by contrasting ‘avant-garde literature [. . .] from Naturalism to Surrealism’ that rejected tradition and the Classics––experimental modernism––with the work of writers such as Maxim Gorky, Thomas Mann, and Romain Rolland.

Bertolt Brecht’s critique of Luckács’s argument interrogated its dependence on bourgeois 19th century techniques or novelists, and drew heavily on his own work as a popular playwright to emphasise the writer’s critical and ideological obligation to engage, and engage with, his living and present audience, to create ‘a living and combative literature [and] keep step with the rapid development of reality’. Theodor Adorno likewise took issue with the ‘absolute idealism’ and ‘dogmatic’ nature of Luckács’s paradigm; but his essays on Luckács and Brecht became part of a broader project on art and ideology through the later twentieth century. Both Brecht and Adorno developed their ideas in part through their correspondence with Walter Benjamin, whose essay on ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936) and posthumously published unfinished *Arcades* project (1927-40) explored the aesthetic and political context and implications of commercial-popular art.

The *Expressionism Debate* therefore constitutes a heteroglot body of oft-contradictory, sometimes sweeping, occasionally rough-hewed, pungent, nuanced and discursive analyses on the merits and value of modernism as a literary, artistic, political and practical ideology, marking a still current critical epoch that prioritizes the dialogue between aesthetics and historicity to either.

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