Gunther Martens

**Kraus, Karl (1874—1936)**

Karl Kraus was a famous literary and cultural critic and cult figure in Vienna’s intellectual scene around 1900. He was the editor of the journal *Die Fackel* ( *The Torch*, 1899-1936). From 1911on, he filled this journal’s pages all by himself. He was originally affiliated with key writers and art critics in Vienna and Berlin (Hermann Bahr, Maximilian Harden, Alfred Kerr, … ), but fell out with most of them. Kraus carefully cultivated his public persona as a polemicist, an intellectual pit-bull and an absolute outsider. His extensive lecture tours and his posthumously published letters revealed that he was in fact “part of a transnational and cosmopolitan clique plugged into the latest artistic developments throughout Europe” (Boes 40).

Born out of a rich merchant family, Kraus, just like other Jewish authors such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Peter Altenberg, Herman Broch, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Elias Canetti, set out to emancipate himself by choosing an “unconventional” life of letters. Kraus did not hesitate to criticize his contemporaries and authors like Heine on account of their being Jewish. A potential case of “Jewish self-hatred” (Gilman), Kraus at the same time questioned the ethnic and racist categories which underpinned the debates over assimilation and on the basis of which Kraus was frequently alienated himself.

While instrumental in bringing to broader attention innovative artists like Wedekind, Trakl, Kokoschka, Loos, and Schoenberg, Kraus fiercely opposed the notion of literary movements, trends or schools as such. Kraus vociferously objected to Impressionism and Expressionism. It has been claimed that in doing so he rendered the emergence of avant-garde literature (which gained full sway in Austria only after the second world-war) superfluous, because he *was* a one-man avant-garde. In spite of the modernist outlook of his quasi-sacred conception of art and his rejection of formal experimentation, Kraus indeed anticipated many avant-garde functions and forms of expression. Kraus’ experimental play *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last days of Mankind*, written between 1915 and 1922) was the first documentary play and a source of inspiration for Bertolt Brecht. Well before Breton’s *Nadja*, it contained photographs; it also contains lengthy stage directions that were conceived of as film scripts. Kraus’ own aesthetic practice involved actionist techniques such as faked op-eds and extensive collage and montage, at times approximating Dadaist practice. His article *Die Gerüchte* (*Rumours*, September 1918), for example, consists of extensive punning on the word ‘rumour’. His caustic aphorisms on women and other topics were meant to shock his readers out of their bourgeois mentality. In fact, Karl Kraus held very progressive views on prostitution, abortion, emancipation and animal rights. Throughout his life, Kraus held successful one-man (evening) performances, reading from his own work, from minor authors like Offenbach and Nestroy or from timeless classics like Shakespeare. He died in 1936; his extensive indictment of Fascism in *Dritte Walpurgisnacht (Third Walpurgis Night*) was published posthumously in 1952.

Given the Fascist’s total annihilation of the Viennese Jewish intellectual scene, Karl Kraus would not have been an entry in this Encyclopaedia without the efforts of Walter Benjamin (who wrote a very dense essay on Kraus) and Theodor W. Adorno, who made his work known to the post-war generation. Kraus’ critique of the press can be read as an antecedent to Adorno and Horkheimer’s pessimistic take on *Kulturindustrie* in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947). Kraus also was a champion figure for the anti-psychiatric movement in the 1970s.

**References and Further Reading**

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**Paratextual material**

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**Audio:**

Karl Kraus sings Offenbach (in German): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alN8vRWPTXA&list=PLCF497C985507C389

Congenial reading of *The Last Days of Mankind* by Helmut Qualtinger (in German and Viennese dialect)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h046M_PRvBE&list=PL98F4A89D8F347D74>

Karl Kraus, Rumours (in German), read by DadaDada TV:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7il0LYxLz0o

**Visual:**

Portraits of Karl Kraus, 1925 by Oskar Kokoschka <http://uploads5.wikipaintings.org/images/oskar-kokoschka/not_detected_235934.jpg> and <http://www.terminartors.com/files/artworks/1/9/5/19539/Kokoschka_Oskar-Karl_Kraus_II.jpg>

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