

Guest Lecture: A discussion of Petra James' paper

1890s: The Belgian and Czech Decadent Novels between Gothicization and Colonialism. Bruges la Morte (1892) by Georges Rodenbach and A Gothic Soul (1900) by Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic

Wednesday, May 29, 2024

3:30-5:30 pm

Kaplan Hall 311



The paper analyses these two key decadent novels as tools for Czech and Belgian national self-determination through the aesthetic process of Gothicization. The “Gothic” trope assumes a socio-political function as the emblem of cultural reappraisal for both Czechs and Belgians, whose national revival of the 19th century was based on a return to a medieval Gothic past, idealized as a period with a high national symbolic value, prefiguring foreign influences. Gothicization is interpreted not only as a process of nation-building but also as a means of obscuring the colonial nature of Belgium of the symbolist modern period and the Czech ambiguous relationship to the exotic Other, often depicted in dehumanizing and misogynist ways. The lecture is based on a chapter from the speaker's current book project, *Between the Lands of Rubens and of Kafka: Modernism Beyond Metropolis in Belgium and Bohemia*.

Petra James is a tenured professor in the Department of Languages and Literatures, Faculty of Letters, Translation and Communication (LTC), Université libre de Bruxelles in Belgium (ULB), and Chair of Czech Studies at ULB (since 2011). She is also the director of the research center MODERNITAS at Maison des Sciences Humaines, ULB, focusing on interdisciplinary research of modernism and avant-garde. Petra James obtained her PhD in Comparative Literature and Slavic Studies from the Université Paris-Sorbonne in 2009. She is one of the four editors-in-chief of the encyclopedic project Cultural History of Central European Avant-Gardes (Brill, in progress), which aims to fundamentally rethink the comparative history of the European avant-garde while focusing on the context of Central Europe. She was a Plumer Visting Research Fellow at Saint-Anne's College, University of Oxford, and resident at the Maison française d'Oxford (2023) and is currently a visiting professor at UC Berkeley (Spring 2024).

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