

Sara Pankenier Weld, *Voiceless Vanguard: The Infantilist Aesthetics of the Russian Avant-Garde*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2014, pp. 212.

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Sara Pankenier Weld's illustrated monograph *Voiceless Vanguard: The Infantilist Aesthetics of the Russian Avant-Garde* makes an important contribution not only to Russian avant-garde studies but also to the field of children's literature and culture studies. This critically-acclaimed book, for which Pankenier Weld was awarded the 2015 International Research Society in Children's Literature Book Award, offers a vital argument for the role of the infant/child in the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde.

*Voiceless Vanguard* consists of a state-of-the-art theoretical introduction, two sections, each one involving two chapters, and conclusions. In each of the four chapters, Pankenier Weld analyses the works of avant-garde figures (representatives of Neo-Primitivism, Cubo-Futurism, Formalism, and Absurdism) who played an important role in the formation of the infantilist aesthetic in the period 1909–1939 and focuses on showing how on the basis of its playful nature Russian avant-garde used the figure of the infant/child in order to produce “a new artistic identity”. (p. 5) Pankenier Weld highlights the contrast between the actual child and the avant-garde constructions and studies “the paradoxes that emerge from the exploitation of the unspeaking subjects”, that is infants/children. (p. 8)

In the introduction, titled “From Voicelessness to Voice”, Pankenier Weld shows that leaders of the Russian avant-garde treated the figure of the ‘infant/child’ as “an unspeaking subject” and tried to oppose “the materiality of language and signification itself.” (p. 4) Moreover, she argues that the ‘preverbal’ state of the infant, as well as “the child’s position before the conventions of verbal and visual representation” predispose the fascination of the Russian avant-garde with the figure of the ‘infant/child’. (p. 4) In the section entitled “The History of an Idea”, Pankenier Weld provides readers with an insightful outline of the history of the figure of the child and its role in Russian culture, showing that even though the avant-garde was not the only artistic organization that treated the child as a creative source, yet it “took this interest further and in a more extreme direction”. (p. 13)

The first section of *Voiceless Vanguard* is devoted to the description of the practices of infantile primitivism. In the chapter titled “Infant Art: Mikhail Larionov, Children's Drawings, and Neo-Primitivist Art” Pankenier Weld not only focuses on the art of Mikhail Larionov, the pioneer of the infantilist aesthetic, but also provides readers with the history of the avant-garde movement and shows that Neo-Primitivist artists (such as Larionov, Goncharova, and Shevchenko) construct the ‘infant/child’ as an abstract ideal and “incorporate the forms of children's creative production into their own artistic practice”. (p. 26) Furthermore, by analysing the artistic activity of Larionov and his fellow artists, Pankenier Weld demonstrates that it led

to a “great interest in children’s own creative productions that rapidly exceeded the boundaries of Neo-Primitivism”. (p. 60)

In “Infant World: Aleksei Kruchenykh, Children’s Language, and Cubo-Futurist Poetics”, Pankenier Weld moves to Cubo-Futurist writers, who, inspired by Neo-Primitivists, took interest in children’s language and used it in their poetic experiments. Focusing on Aleksei Kruchenykh’s writings, including some little-known poetry and collaborations with Velimri Khlebnikov, Pankenier Weld argues that Russian Futurists treated the ambiguous figure of the ‘infant/child’ “as a means of access to the future of language” as well as “an admirable example of how to create the poetry of the future”. (p. 62) She highlights “the enfant terrible” in Kruchenykh’s writing and focuses on the Futurists’ fascination with the language of the child and its role in the development of transsense language and poetry.

The second section of *Voiceless Vanguard* consists of two chapters on the development of the infantile aesthetic. In “Infant Eye: Viktor Shklovsky, the Naive Perspective, and Formalist Theory”, Pankenier Weld argues that Shklovsky regarded infancy as an important device already in his early “linguistic theoretical interest in the extremes of language exemplified by the unspeaking state, and the confrontation with language evident in infantile babble and children’s language play” and preserved this “attention to the infantile subject position [...] in his celebration of the naive perspective” in some of his later creative and theoretical pieces. (p. 106) What is more, she argues that the “strategic dislocation” of infancy was the goal of Shklovsky’s avant-garde theories. (p. 106) Interestingly, by analysing the Formalist theory of Shklovsky, Pankenier Weld shows the infant’s change “from voicelessness to voice and from objecthood to subjecthood” (p. 106) as well as the shift in Russian avant-garde from “a facile infantile primitivism” to a theoretically sophisticated infantilism aesthetic. (p. 106)

In the last chapter, “Infant Mind: Daniil Kharms, Childish Alogism, and OBERIU Literature of the Absurd”, Pankenier Weld focuses on the writings of Daniil Kharms and the writers of OBERIU (Association for Real Art), who eventually fell victim to totalitarianism. She argues that the infantile in Kharms’ prose for children functions as “a source of laughter and the comic” and “a symbolic victim with the potential to reveal the ethical and existential implications of the text”. (p. 158) Pankenier Weld rightly points out that Kharms tries to give voice and agency “to the infant/child even as it enters into a playful simulation of infantile cognition”. (p. 158)

*Voiceless Vanguard* is a well-structured and coherent book which deals with the connection between children’s speech, writings and art, and the avant-garde experiments in art, poetry, prose, and theory. Pankenier Weld shows how Neo-Primitivism “reduces art to a child scribble” (chapter one), Cubo-Futurism “reduces poetry to infant babble” (chapter two), Formalism “reduces art to the naive perspective” (chapter three), and finally how Absurdism “reduces prose to childish alogism” (chapter

four). (p. 208) Even though Pankenier Weld focuses on the Russian avant-garde, her book should also be of great interest to scholars of European modernism, children's literature, as well as of late imperial and early Soviet culture.

*Mateusz Świetlicki*