

## PAUL DERMÉE AND THE NEW SPIRIT AT *CONTIMPORANUL*

ADRIANA COPACIU LAZAR<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** *Paul Dermée and the New Spirit at Contimporanul.* This paper aims to yield new insights into the network of international artistic collaborations associated with the magazine *Contimporanul* during its early years, particularly the special ties with the artist Paul Dermée. In light of a model of artistic sociability which seems to be specific to peripheral avant-garde journals, our focus on relay-figures like Dermée, a representative of the federative vocation of the avant-garde, serves to develop broader understanding of the programmatic and aesthetic trajectory of the Romanian magazine and its protagonists. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the role of critical mediator played by Dermée is not only important in the accumulation of symbolic capital, but it can also help track the peripheral circuit and reception of various artistic movements, like Cubism, in the pages of the constructivist-oriented *Contimporanul*.

**Keywords:** *Avant-garde, magazines, literary sociability, network, cubism, constructivism, periphery*

**REZUMAT.** *Paul Dermée și noul spirit de la Contimporanul.* Lucrarea de față se prezintă ca o perspectivă nouă asupra rețelelor de colaborare artistică internațională asociate revistei *Contimporanul* în perioada sa timpurie, concentrându-se în special asupra relațiilor cu Paul Dermée. Având ca punct de pornire o paradigmă a sociabilității artistice, care a ajuns să fie considerată specifică pentru modul de funcționare al revistelor de avangardă periferice, investigarea rolului jucat de Paul Dermée, un reprezentant al vocației federative a artei, contribuie la o mai bună înțelegere a traiectoriei estetice a *Contimporanului* și a protagoniștilor săi. În cele din urmă, această cercetare vede dincolo de poziția de mediator a lui Paul Dermée, de funcția sa în acumularea de capital simbolic și trasează contribuția sa la conturarea unei paradigme de circulație și receptare a diverselor mișcări artistice, precum cubismul, în cadrul publicației de orientare constructivistă, *Contimporanul*.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *avangardă, reviste, sociabilitate literară, rețea, cubism, constructivism, periferie*

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Back in 1923, when Paul Dermée (1886-1951) was triumphantly introduced to the Romanian readership as the new head of the Parisian outlet of the magazine *Contimporanul*, he was already locally known as a poet, and recognized internationally as a Dada associate and as the director of the magazine *L'Esprit nouveau. Revue internationale d'esthétique*, alongside Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret. In spite of his untainted commitment to the mission of *L'Esprit nouveau*, Paul Dermée was revoked from the directorial committee one year later, a flash in the pan that left behind a well consolidated project in the relentless hands of Ozenfant and Jeanneret (who adopted the *nom de plume*, Le Corbusier). The news also reached Bucharest as the advertisement section published in issue 31 of 17 February 1923 merely testifies. However, it is worth noticing that two months later in an editorial note reinforcing the conceit of the magazine and announcing the network of its future artistic collaborations, *Contimporanul* features Paul Dermée as “director of the respected magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*”. (Anon., *Contimporanul*, 37-38, 7 April 1923, II: 5).

In addition, events began to rapidly unfold in the life of the Romanian magazine and the 41<sup>st</sup> issue of May 1923 permits us to examine the direct implications of these networks of support and its actors. The statement of programmatic position was made in the following note to the readers: “Mr. Paul Dermée, a reputed French art critic and poet, has accepted the directorship of our magazine in Paris, in order to stimulate the exchange of collaborations and artistic information between France and our young Romania.” (*Idem.*) At the time, the Romanian magazine was leaving eclecticism behind and embracing the doctrines of international constructivism. A new identity, both ideological and aesthetic entails and the question of artistic legitimacy – especially one bearing a French stamp – became a higher stake than ever. Within this logic, it would be shortsighted to believe that *Contimporanul* was not taking a well-considered approach, layering two profiles of *L'Esprit nouveau*.

Embedded in this ambiguous stance lay the assumption that *Contimporanul* made a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the era of Paul Dermée, fostering the heritage of Apollinaire of a new active spirit encompassing all aspects of life and hailing a kaleidoscopic vision of the artist, and, on the other, a more dogmatic, scientific era, imposed by Ozenfant and Jeanneret. Faced with two discordant images of the magazine that eventually led to the separation of its founders, the Romanian magazine played on ambivalence, endorsing both Dermée and his successors in the editorial sideline of *L'Esprit nouveau*. This was a direct consequence of the magazine's international engagements, a legitimizing strategy expected to result in the creation of an artistic sociability network with a high strategic value for the

Romanian periodical, and a further consequence of its own aesthetic and programmatic indeterminacy. Such a development was in fact recurrent in the evolution of the magazine. Once the effervescence of the events surrounding the peak year 1924 fizzled out, the theoretical articles and even the advertising and promotion system of *Contimporanul* emblemized at various levels an admiration for polarizing tendencies and jangled affinities.

In order to complete the canvas of the scarcely discussed collaboration between Paul Dermée and *Contimporanul* further details need to be brought into discussion. It is important to recall that Marcel Iancu<sup>2</sup> was listed among the collaborators of *L'Esprit nouveau*, announced in the first issue of the magazine. The review promoted the doctrine of the “a new constructive spirit” and such aims seemed perfectly aligned with the preoccupations of the Romanian architect, aside with those of the Romanian periodical: “there is a new spirit; this is a spirit of construction and synthesis directed by a clear concept. [...] *A great epoch has just begun* (original emphasis) since every form of the human spirit is being organized under the same principle” (*L'Esprit nouveau*, 1, 1968, unnumbered pages). It is well known that a similar commitment to the constructive spirit animated the artistic pursuits of Iancu during his stay in Zurich, when he would be interested in the experience of an “architecture of time”<sup>3</sup>, as he confesses in a letter to Seuphor, one of Dermée’s long-run collaborators, written shortly after the famous Dusseldorf Congress. Within this framework, it could be argued that when Iancu coopted Paul Dermée “to direct” the Parisian extension of *Contimporanul* his gesture was self-knowingly twofold: it sought to advance Constructivism, by linking the Romanian periodical to key players associated with the movement, and it was aimed at self-promotion. More significantly, the interplay of shared affinities, anchored in a synthetic and collective vision of the work of art that both artists craved, surpassed the pages of *Contimporanul*. Hence, an epistolary

<sup>2</sup> The highly heterogenous list of collaborators of the first issue of *L'Esprit nouveau* was entitled “Quelques-uns de nos collaborateurs”, and counted around one hundred names, like Louis Aragon, Victor Basch, André Breton, Blaise Cendrars, Carra, Karel Capek, De Chirico, Léon Chenoy, Benedetto Croce, Theo van Doesburg, P. Drieu La Rochelle, Georges Duhamel, Carl Einstein, Paul Eluard, Ezra Pound, Albert Gleizes, Jean de Gourmont, Ivan Goll, Juan Gris, V. Huidobro, Max Jacob, Janco, André Lhote, J. Lipchitz, Loos, Marinetti, Metzinger, Piet Mondrian, Ozenfant, Giovanni Papini, Paulhan, Picabia, Enrico Prampolini, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, André Salmon, Erik Satie, Schoenberg, Severini, Ardengo Soffici, Soupault, Stravinski, Tokine, Tzara, Ungaretti, etc. See *L'Esprit nouveau*, 1, 20 October 1920.

<sup>3</sup> “J’avais en effet essayé, peut-être parmi les premiers, d’associer l’idée d’art constructiviste à une architecture du temps qu’avait inventé Dada à Zurich”. Marcel Iancu, Letter to Michel Seuphor, cited by Marie-Aline Prat in her book *Peinture et avant-garde au seuil des années 30*, Lausanne, L’Âge d’Homme, 1984 : 99.

exchange is initiated between Dermée and Iancu, on the one hand, and Tzara, on the other, that spanned throughout the year 1923.

In a letter from Paul Dermée dated 23 April 1923 and addressed to Iancu, we can read a most revealing testimonial of the former director of *L'Esprit nouveau* regarding his position at the time: "L'Esprit nouveau [...] is dead, but we are working on something less sumptuous and more alive." (*Apud*. Meazzi, 2008: 123). Such a declaration confirms the fact that when in 1923 the editorial board of *Contemporanul* premiered the collaboration of Dermée it was in full acknowledgement of the schism that divided its founders after barely three issues.

Moreover, it would be useful to consider that the role assigned to Dermée echoed an equivalent proposition launched in 1918 by Tzara<sup>4</sup>, consolidating a pattern of international collaboration and exchange that resulted in cultural capital increase. Dermée would not only enhance collaboration between artistic circles, but he would also infuse this relationship with a much sought after *Frenchness* that someone like Dermée (a Belgian-born) could provide. Interestingly enough, like in the case of Dermée's collaboration with Prampolini, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Noi* – that also counted Iancu among its contributors – and organizer of Futurist events in Paris, this thick fabric of collaborations revolved inevitably around the magnetic figure of Tzara. The same day when he sent his letter to Iancu, Dermée also wrote a note to Tzara, inviting him to support his "Romanian" venture: "I was commissioned by the Romanian magazine 'Contemporanul' to collect poems for an issue dedicated to 'La Jeune France'. I would appreciate it if you could send me an unpublished poem of around forty lines in the next days." (*Apud* Meazzi, 2008: 123).

The internationalist agenda of *Contemporanul* was a multilayered process, it was the much needed radical break and an assertion of a new outlook. Consequently, Dermée was to be regarded as more than a figure of passage in the pages of the magazine. He was the international associate, yet his alignment with *Contemporanul*, mediated as it should be clear by now, by Iancu, reflected more intimately the aesthetic preoccupations that the latter aimed to infuse to the Romanian periodical. Thus, in 1923, Dermée would

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<sup>4</sup> We emphasize the fact that the epistolary communication set in 1918 between Dermée and Tzara concerning the issue of a Parisian relay for *Dada* is of extreme importance for the evolution of the movement within the context of a French artistic dominance. "Parlons franc, comme des hommes nouveaux : il me plairait assez d'avoir une revue amie. Je vous fais donc une proposition : indiquez à côté de celle de Suisse, la vôtre, une adresse à Paris, la mienne. [...] Votre revue, si elle devient régulière, fournie et bien représentée à Paris, sera rapidement très importante. Nous manquons d'un organe clair, [...] comme un chant du coq ou un cri de colère." Paul Dermée, Letter to Tristan Tzara, dated 10 June 1918. See Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2005, p. 530.

become in charge of a column entitled “Letters on art”, a prime legitimizing strategy that relied on foreign correspondence to draw attention to the magazine, locally and internationally. Similar positions were attributed to Richard Huelsenbeck, who more or less regularly signed the column “News from Germany”, and to Marinetti and Prampolini, who sent the “News from Italy”, both short-lived relationships, while the correspondence with Georges Linze, the author of the column “Letters from Belgium” turned out to be remarkably consistent and spanned over a long time bracket. We might also note, in deepening our focus on the magazine, that the more its international collaborations gained momentum, the more did *Contimporanul* give up on its editorial coverage of political or social issues, simultaneously eliminating general interest press venues from its “revue de presse” whilst preserving an exclusive avant-garde advertising circuit. Even the highly esteemed *Gallimard* and the *NRF* are excluded from the regular references of *Contimporanul*, as it strived to commit itself to a more coherent ideological and programmatic trajectory.

Dermée’s articles for *Contimporanul* were mostly accounts of the Parisian art world and apparently diverged very little from this single line. The first contribution he sent to Bucharest covered Juan Gris’ exhibition at the Simon Gallery in Paris, from 20 March to 5 April 1923, showcasing fifty-four paintings by Gris. The importance of the event is singled out in an issue preceding the publication of the article, as the following lines suggest: “The painter Juan Gris, so musical and gracious among the cubists, who has been one of the first champions of the new art, along with Picasso and Braque, closes these days his exhibition at Gabriel Simon.” (Anon., *Contimporanul*, 41, 6 May 1923, II: 2).

Nevertheless, when reading Dermée’s review, it is surprising to notice that the French journalist abstained from pronouncing the word “cubism”. Such a gesture must have left the Romanian readership in splits, as Dermée was writing for an audience who was already familiar with the works of Gleizes and Metzinger (*Simbolul*, 3, 1 December, 1912) since their publication in 1912 and, more recently, with the work of Léonce Rosenberg. In the same line, in its attempt to bring the Romanian public closer to the exhibition, Dermée’s text made no reference to Juan Gris’ unmissable *collage* artworks, although it was widely agreed upon, it was this invention that changed the face of art, due to the concerted efforts of Gris, Braque and Picasso. Another important missed reference was Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler<sup>5</sup>, a reputed Cubist art dealer and art

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler was a German art dealer and an art historian mainly associated to Cubism. In 1907 he opens the Kahnweiler Gallery in Paris, active until 1914, signing exclusive contracts with the majority of cubists. During the War he fled to Switzerland and it was only in 1920 that alongside André Simon he reopened the Simon Gallery (1920-1940). In 1920 he also published the work *The Rise of Cubism*.

historian who was also the curator of the exhibition. He was a pivotal figure in the career of Gris whom – faithful to his gallerist of 1914 – was promoted at the time as one of the members of the “Kahnweiler group”. In exchange, Dermée incorporated strangely offbeat details in his presentation of the exhibition, introducing Gris as one of the members of “the School of Chatou”, largely associated with Fauvism and represented by Derain or Vlaminck, or as a member of the “small, yet brave group of 13, Rue Ravignan, exalted by the radioactive presence of Picasso.” (Dermée, *Contimporanul*, 42, June 1923, II: 3).

However flattering and impassioned his words sounded – “Juan Gris has long travelled the dry and desert lands [...]. He is Orpheus, the wizard, who brings back Eurydice from the Inferno, a place from which very few have returned.” (*Idem*) – commingled with unavowed excerpts taken from Maurice Raynal’s comments on the exhibition<sup>6</sup>, Dermée’s review is visibly subjective and highly ambiguous. His lines seem to be adding up to an underlying critique of a Cubism with classical traits, *classicisé*, that was making a comeback in the 1920s. In return, someone like Ozenfant, for example, offered a whole different perspective on the work of Gris, featuring news about the painter in the pages of his magazine, *L’Esprit nouveau*, and even buying his artwork. At the time, Gris was following a more autonomous path than the one he had embarked upon during his early cubist years, largely envisaged as the period of analytical French Cubism and sanctioned as “illogic”, chaotic and destructive by the Russian constructivists, for instance. Highly skeptical at Gris’ lyrical return to his cubist aesthetic roots, Dermée chooses to focus solely on his preoccupations for the “pure, untainted novelty” (*Idem*) which was more in tune with his own pursuit of “the new spirit”.

It takes not more than a look at several of Iancu’s articles, to notice similar positions in the case of Cubism. As we know, Iancu ranked among the dadaists who had taken the path of a more progressive and constructivist avant-garde and once he returned to Bucharest, his activity mostly determined the course of the Romanian avant-garde project, both in the case of *Contimporanul* and *Punct*. Hence, the local reception of Cubism depended largely on the workings of his artistic vision. As the art historian Ioana Vlasiu (Vlasiu, 1994: 40) points out, Iancu, Maxy, Michăilescu, or even Brauner, seemed to return to Cubism as a result of a late aesthetic reaction aimed at remedying the fragmentary assimilation of abstraction. In addition, it would be hard not to agree with Vlasiu when she concludes to a generally unproductive local response to Cubism. Within this context, Dermée’s choice of articles for *Contimporanul* is all the more important.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Dermée’s text was published in Romanian and there is no explicit reference to Maurice Raynal’s comments on the exhibition published in *L’Esprit nouveau* (Maurice Raynal, “Juan Gris”, *L’Esprit nouveau* 5, February, 1921). By comparing the two texts we could conclude to a striking compatibility.

In the issue 44 of *Contimporanul*, Dermée published a new article “Letters on art. The art dealer”. While his critique was aimed at the world of art dealers, symbolically represented by a stereotyped Felix Fénéon, the intermediary of ready to hang collections, Dermée half-heartedly assigned an undeniable value to Cubism: “in order to take note of a movement that is by now impossible to overlook, Cubism, every collector should from the very first day buy a Picasso, a Gris or a Braque for his gallery.” (Dermée, July 1923, II: 2) However, given the context that Cubism was associated to in terms of “modern art”, (Cross, Guillaumon, Signac, Longkind, Vuillard, Matisse, Modigliani, Vlaminck), it is slightly difficult not to see that Dermée does not miss the opportunity to imply that Cubism could no longer take centre stage in the art world. In other words, as a collectable object, Cubism was viewed as canonical, non-contemporary, even, as an object of art history. In addition, such an outlook would not deny Cubism’s role as historical source in the development of a revolution of abstraction, supported, among others, by the constructivists. In 1926, Iancu would revisit Cubism, reinforcing its impact on the evolution of art, and comforting Dermée’s perspective: “Cubism is the last link in the chain of the evolution of painting from the last four centuries. It set forth the problem of the *plastic construction*. Only then did the knowledge of the *plastic elements* become essential.” (Iancu, *Contimporanul*, May 1926, V: 4.) In fact, the historicist view on Cubism was a striking reality of the French cultural field as it began to be addressed mostly in terms of “stylistic influence”. In the same line, Gris himself makes a most revealing statement in a letter to Kahnweiler: “The exaggeration around the Dada movement and the likes of Picabia makes us look classical and this does not seem to bother me.” (Silver, 1991: 273).

From issue 45 onwards, the correspondence from Paris signed by Dermée ceased to arrive. Nonetheless, continuity was reinforced under a different form and informative notes, mainly reflecting the richness of the editorial activity of the couple Dermée-Arnauld, took the stage. Their initiative to launch a new Parisian journal, *Interventions*<sup>7</sup>, intended “to replace *L’Esprit nouveau*” was highlighted in the irregular column “News from France”. Likewise, the publication of the launch issue of *Documents Internationaux de l’Esprit Nouveau* was announced in the issue 76 of *Contimporanul*, linking it to more or less fellow-feeling magazines *Dokumentum*, *Horizont*, *Cahiers d’art*, *Anthologie* and *Der Sturm*. *Contimporanul* warrants the new platform as a

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Dermée published several ephemeral magazines that reunited some of the most high-profile dadaists. *Z* was launched in March 1920 and it was a one-off venture, while in December 1923 he published the two-issues *Interventions. Gazette internationale des Lettres et des Arts. Le Mouvement Accélééré* published in 1924 and it is considered a relay for *Interventions*.

symbolic voice of “the authentic documents of international modern thought” and shows eager to built up the circulation of “this review of modern Europe directed by Dermée, Seuphor and Prampolini.” (Anon., *Contimporanul*, 76, May-June 1924, III: 16). The one-off editorial venture is the culmination of Dermée’s ambition to reunite all artistic tendencies under one single banner, invariably located in Paris: “[...] il n’y a qu’un seul esprit nouveau – le futurisme, l’expressionisme, le cubisme, le dadaïsme, le purisme, le constructivisme, le néo-plasticisme, le surréalisme, l’abstractivisme, le babilisme, le soporifisme, le mécanisme, le simultanéisme, le suprematisme, l’ultraïsme, le panlyrisme, le primitivisme – et tous les ismes à venir [...] valent un seul esprit nouveau mondial : décentralisation”. (Dermée, 1927)

If the collaboration with Dermée, seen today as a peripheral figure of the avant-garde, albeit pivotal to a hub of artistic networks which were also minor in turn does not reach beyond 1924 – a discontinuity that could have been triggered by the cessation of activity of *Contimporanul* until April 1924, or by Dermée’s partial retreat from the literary world – he will remain an active player of an avant-garde network of collaborations with great symbolic standing for the Romanian magazine. Protagonist of a federative vocation of the avant-garde, a courted figure as well by the Italian futurists, the Belgian constructivists or by the neo-plasticists, and invoked by Breton<sup>8</sup> in his famous “intervention” of Barcelona when he urged the public to see art as a continuum, as “Cubism, Futurism and Dada [...] all three participate in a more general movement [...]” (Papanikolas, 2010: 152), Dermée was a relay figure. As it can be read through the words of Pierre-Louis Flouquet, Dermée acted as a unifier, proving essential for the integration of foreign artists in Paris, an activity that eventually mirrors his editorial ambitions. “J’ai rencontré chez lui, à Paris, Rue Cassini (en face de l’Observatoire – quartier Montparnasse) de nombreux débutants qui se sont fort bien débrouillés depuis. Et puis, toutes les origines : néerlandais, hongrois, finlandais, chinois, russes, irlandais [...]” (Flouquet, *Apud* Meazzi, 2007: 243)

Evocatively described as “commingled with all, rejected by all” (“Mêlé à tout, rejeté par beaucoup”) (Meazzi, 2008: 111), Dermée was also an associate of other lively networks built around foreign mediating figures who were drawn to Paris, like Prampolini, founder of the magazine *Noi*, Seuphor, co-director of *Het Overzicht* and *Cercle et Carré*, a collaboration which led them to organize the “Soirées littéraires de l’Esprit nouveau”. Naturally, Dermée’s interpersonal connections superseded the Parisian *milieux* and he had strong contacts with

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<sup>8</sup> Conference at the Ateneo in Barcelona, 17 November 1922, on the occasion of Picabia’s exhibition at Dalmau Gallery. See André Breton, *Les pas perdus*, Paris, Gallimard, 1924, p. 160.



the Belgian and even Hungarian constructivists, as he would play an important role in the re-launch of the exiled magazine *Ma*, in Paris, and even had a strong impact on the career of someone like André Kertész<sup>9</sup>.

Eventually, the sociability network interwoven around Paul Dermée brings to fore the emergence of an international of peripheral milieux, discussed by Pascale Casanova in her seminal work *The World Republic of Letters*, who endeavors to nuance that such individuals are the fruit of a particular type of lucidity, specific to ex-centric protagonists. Dermée's positioning within the fabric of interpersonal connections surrounding *Contimporanul* is an essential asset for the magazine's new set of alliances, fostering its stringent need to accumulate symbolic cultural capital. In retrospect, the collaboration with Dermée is also indicative of a change in size of the set of alliances of the Romanian magazine that urges us to see beyond individual connections. Inevitably, the laws governing peripheral avant-garde periodicals credit the fact that they function as small communities made of mediations. For this particularly long-run magazine, Dermée is among the first of a solid line of mediators that would link *Contimporanul* to other less-visible, ex-centric networks, among which the Belgian constructivists gain prominence.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Dermée signed the presentation text for André Kertész's first exhibition in Paris, in March 1927.

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