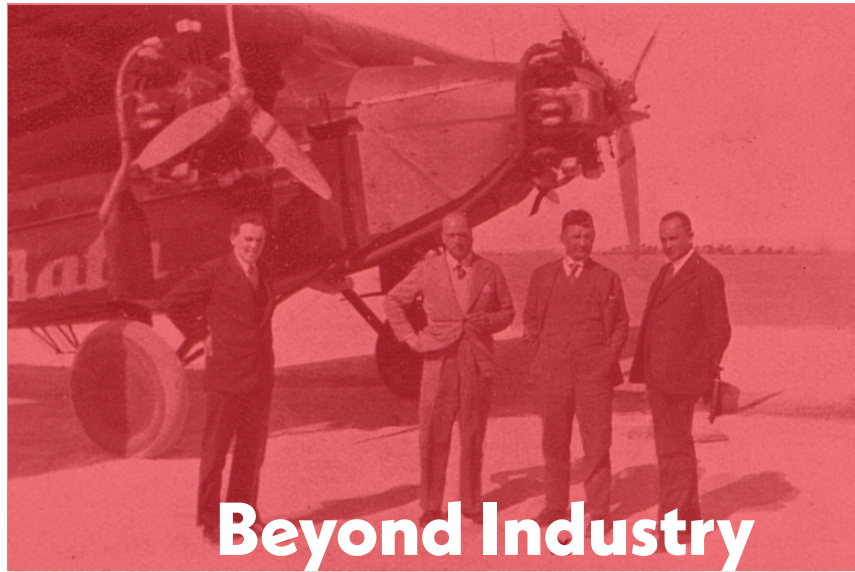




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The Baťa World as Cultural Model

A roundtable on Baťa narratives, values, and transnational representations

13th November 2025

14:30 - 18:30

Maison des Sciences Humaines, Université Libre de Bruxelles
Reception Room (R3.105), Building DE1, 3rd floor
Avenue Antoine Depage 1, 1050 Ixelles - Bruxelles

Far more than a successful business enterprise, the Baťa phenomenon shaped an entire vision of modern life. From the interwar town of Zlín to factory communities across Europe and beyond, Baťa created not only new forms of industrial organisation, but also distinctive ways of thinking, communicating, and imagining the modern world.

This seminar invites an interdisciplinary discussion on the cultural dimensions of the Baťa legacy – the values, narratives, and representational strategies through which the company constructed meaning within both local and global contexts. Baťa's world can be viewed as a cultural model that combined specific modes of communication (slogans, mottos, in-house magazines) with its own narrative genres (travel writing, reports, adventure stories, and later memoirs).

The discussion will address both the internal company culture and the outward reach of Baťa's international expansion – for instance in India, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, where the company acted as an agent of cultural transfer.

Held as a roundtable working seminar, the event will provide a space to share ongoing research, discuss methodological approaches, and explore how the notion of "Baťa-ness" has evolved across time and contexts. Its aim is to connect researchers across disciplines and to encourage new forms of collaboration and exchange in the study of industrial modernity.

Organised by Barbora Svobodová (Modernitas, ULB) and funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowship programme (Grant Agreement No. 101211819, Project MSCA PF – Lit-In-Soc).

Programme

14:00 – 14:10 Opening

14:10 – 14:55 Sebastian Mühl (Zurich University of the Arts, Art Academy of Latvia): **Universalism and utopian imagination**

14:55 – 15:40 Víctor Muñoz Sanz (Technische Universiteit Delft): **The Cultural Dynamics of Decoupling: Architectural Myths and Networked Legitimation in Transnational Bata Urbanism**

15:40 – 16:00 Coffee break

16:00 – 16:45 Jinřich Toman (University of Michigan): **Pictures of Zlín, Pictures from Zlín**

16:45 – 17:30 Barbora Svobodová (Université Libre de Bruxelles): **The Industrial Pilgrim: Travel Writing within the Bata System**

17:30 – 18:00 Closing discussion

The link to join online via MS Teams:

[MS Teams](#)

Meeting ID: 382 179 863 609 2

Passcode: kL6bM6JN

Book of abstracts

Universalism and utopian imagination

Dr. phil. Sebastian Mühl (Zurich University of the Arts, Art Academy of Latvia)

Although Zlín was one of the largest and most ambitious urban development projects in Central Europe in the early 20th century, the story of this Moravian village of just a few hundred inhabitants, which developed into a functional factory town of over forty thousand, was long lost to memory. Drawing on ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement or the Bauhaus, it was called a “luminous phenomenon” by LeCorbusier during his visit in 1935. But Zlín was equally exemplary for a “dialectics of enlightenment”, turning emancipatory ideas into their opposite, embracing social control, rationalisation and uniformity.

In this presentation, I will unfold the aesthetics of universalism of the architectural model of Zlín against the backdrop of its ideological contradictions. The later-built satellite towns, the so-called “Bata Villes”, constructed mostly in the 1930s, exported the architectural model on a global scale. As an early example of globalisation, they were equally shaped by Zlín’s modular block grid, a universal system of forms and volumes. Focussing on my research film “Satellites” which revisits five of the former the Bata Villes across Europe, I will discuss aspects of historicity, entanglement and local situatedness that complicate the utopian character and universalism of Zlín’s architectural model.

The Cultural Dynamics of Decoupling: Architectural Myths and Networked Legitimation in Transnational Baťa Urbanism

Dr. Víctor Muñoz Sanz (Department of Urbanism, Technische Universiteit Delft)

This presentation analyzes the transnational expansion of the Bata Shoe Company in the 1930s as a complex act of cultural transfer, where urbanism and architecture functioned as institutional myths intended to project corporate modernity and organizational efficiency. Guided by the framework of sociological institutionalism, the study examines the dialectical relationship between the centralized Zlín headquarters and its satellite branches (e.g., Batanagar, Best, East Tilbury), defining the project as a „networked utopia“. The initial blueprints exported from Zlín, characterized by a radical modernist grid and functional zoning, symbolized the company's internal rationalization. However, implementation abroad quickly revealed a decoupling between the formal corporate ideals (the myths) and construction reality (the ceremony). This decoupling was triggered by local institutional contexts and cultural resistance; for example, the modern grid plan for Best (Netherlands) was rejected by local authorities who feared it threatened the area's „spiritual health“ and sense of community. Similarly, the Orsett Council in the UK rejected the initial East Tilbury plan, forcing the adoption of externally legitimated Garden City principles.

The analysis tracks how challenges to social legitimation in one location diffused rapidly across the Baťa network, leading to the institutionalization and diffusion of new design practices—like the „English Plan“—which adapted the corporate myth to gain political and social acceptance globally. By focusing on these moments of conflict, adaptation, and diffusion among branches, this study reveals Baťa's shifting approach to cultural transfer: moving from a rigid imposition of architectural form to a pragmatic negotiation designed to maintain the coherence and legitimacy of the corporate cultural model on an international scale.

Pictures of Zlín, Pictures from Zlín

Prof. Dr. Jindřich Toman (Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures, University of Michigan)

The presentation reviews visual material originating from Baťa's Zlín. The first part focuses on photo representation of organized events and the ways company ideology was integrated into these images. An additional focus is on the photographic and filmic representation of labor in Baťa' factories. The final section focuses on visual pedagogy developed in Zlín schools, especially that of the reform pedagogue Vladimír Konvička. A preliminary conclusion suggests that visuality represented a significant mechanism that helped transform this company town into a total environment.

The Industrial Pilgrim: Travel Writing within the Baťa System

Mgr. et Mgr. Barbora Svobodová, Ph.D. (MODERNITAS MSH, Université Libre de Bruxelles)

The phenomenon of travel formed a significant part of the Baťa system, serving not only the practical aims of corporate expansion and the search for new markets, but also carrying strong symbolic and ideological meanings. Travel—whether in the form of business expeditions undertaken by Tomáš and Jan Antonín Baťa, journeys of other company representatives and employees, or reports written by professional journalists—became a key means of constructing the image of the company as a global, modern, and civilizational project. Baťa's travelogues and reportage thus represent a distinctive genre reflecting the company's cultural model and its vision of the modern world and the new industrial human.

The paper focuses on selected travel texts published in corporate periodicals and publishing houses (*Tomáš Baťa o svém letu do Indie* (*Tomáš Baťa on His Flight to India*), Emil Forejtník – *Le-*

tadlem do Kapského města (By Plane from Zlín to Cape Town)), as well as on company-supported fiction (Tomáš Antonín Pánek – *Živé dílo (The Living Work)*), in which economic expansion intertwines with a utopian discourse of progress and a universalist vision of the global order, reflecting, among other things, the ideological legacy of colonialism. The aim of the paper is to show how travel writing and the broader discourse of mobility became integral to the construction of Baťa's identity, founded on industrial rationality, labour, efficiency, and faith in modern civilization.