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AVANT-GARDIST PRACTICES AND THE PROBLEM OF *ENGAGÉ* ART IN SOCIALISM

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Zgodovinske avantgarde so program, da odpravijo zaporo buržoazne umetnosti, udejanjile tako, da so se povezale z gibanji, ki so hotela radikalno spremeniti družbo. V jugoslovanskem kontekstu so ta problem reševali v »spopadu na književni levici«, v slovenskem ga je rešila socialna književnost tridesetih let. Partizanska umetnost je predelala to rešitev in proizvedla novo umetnostno formacijo. Po socialistični revoluciji je »kritična generacija« na novo postavila in reševala te probleme.

avantgarda, spopad na književni levici, partizanska umetnost, kritična generacija

Historical avant-gardes carried out their program to break out of the closure of bourgeois art by connecting with movements that sought radical social change. In the Yugoslav context, this problem gave rise to the »conflict on the literary left,« in the Slovenian context it was solved by the social literature of the 1930s. Partisan art reworked this solution and produced a new art formation. After the socialist revolution, the »critical generation« posed and was solving these problems anew.

avant-garde, conflict on the literary left, Partisan art, critical generation

1 General considerations

The problem of socially committed artistic practices *after* socialist revolution seems inversely symmetrical to the problem of artistic avant-gardes *before* the revolution. Before the revolution, artistic avant-gardes endeavored to *associate* themselves with revolutionary movements; after the revolution, the new artistic practices tended to *dissociate* themselves from the revolutionary politics on power.

Historical avant-gardes were unable to accomplish their project to break out of the aesthetic closure and to intervene directly in historical processes unless they encountered a political movement committed to destroying the existing world. At the point of the encounter, however, avant-gardes revealed themselves caught within the bourgeois »autonomous« sphere of culture, whereas the »masses,« their presumed public, appeared trapped within the clichés of bourgeois and pre-bourgeois ideologies. The encounter between avant-gardist art and revolutionary politics seemed doomed to fail.

Artistic practices invented several exits from this seeming dead end. Some Soviet constructivists engaged in what one would now call industrial design. Yugoslav and some French surrealists abandoned surrealism and adopted social art in line with the political doctrine of the Communist Party.

2 The conflict on the literary left

The breaks out of the bourgeois aesthetic closure were achieved amid great intellectual turmoil because they subverted the established practices and ideologies. In Yugoslavia, the »conflict on the literary left« (Lasić 1970; Iveković 1970; Kalezić 1982, 1990, 1999) was conducted in the terms of the »tendency in art,« of the relation between »form and content,« of »fidelity to life,« and so on. Notwithstanding its pre-theoretical tools, the debate established a new problematic: one that had been constitutively obscured by the aesthetic tradition.

Roughly following Medvedev (1928, 1976), artistic practice can be conceived as the elaboration of ideological elements, itself socially determined, but unaware of its own determination (Močnik 2004: 10–19, 2007: 49–98). The debates on the »literary left« aimed at the sociohistorical determination of artistic practices, the constitutive blind spot of the bourgeois aesthetic.

Unawareness of their sociohistorical determination produces the belief that the aesthetic artefacts are trans-historical, emancipated from their sociohistorical conditions of production.¹ In anthropology, this type of belief is conceptualized as »specific skepticism«: »Most of my [Azande] acquaintances believed that there are a few entirely reliable practitioners [of witchcraft], but that the majority are quacks« (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 185).² Likewise, when examining aesthetic artefacts, it is necessary to be critical of every singular creation, while believing that aesthetic creation is possible in general (Breznik 2010).

The positions of traditional artistic practices, avant-gardes, and post-avant-gardist practices can be conceptualized in the terms of specific versus general skepticism:

- Traditional modern art rests upon the ideology of specific skepticism. Every particular artefact is critically scrutinized on the background of the general belief in the possibility of an authentic aesthetic phenomenon.
- Avant-garde art relies upon generalized skepticism. Past art in general is considered to be *passéist* and non-authentic; only avant-gardist practices and artefacts are admitted as authentic.
- Post-avant-gardist practices (Soviet productivism, social literature, and fascist architecture, but also contemporary art) are supported by general skepticism. Artistic practices and institutions as such are considered non-authentic; authentic practices are those that subvert the art system in general. However, when these

1 Maja Breznik shows how the emergence of an »autonomous sphere of culture« during the Renaissance is the result of class struggles *and* a decisive factor in the march to power of the new proto-capitalist classes. Capitalism replaced feudal physical oppression with a more effective symbolic violence that we now call »culture« (Breznik 2005, 2013).

2 For the opposition of specific versus general skepticism, see Lloyd 1990.

practices are recognized by the very art system they challenge, they enter into the system (Breznik 2011; Đorđević 2019; Pantić 2019a, 2019b).

The opposed positions in the »conflict on the literary left« can accordingly be classified in the following way:

- Surrealists: their ideology was avant-gardist generalized skepticism.
- Social art was a post-avant-gardist practice, and its ideology was general skepticism. In their view, authentic practices should challenge and subvert the bourgeois cultural and art systems in general.³

3 The median position

It is now possible to understand the difficulty of the position adopted by Miroslav Krleža in the debate on the left (Krleža 1934, 1939a, 1939b, 1939c; Lasić 1987; Kalezić 1990; Visković 2001). Although he opposed bourgeois art and avant-gardisms (i.e., rejecting both specific and generalized skepticism), Krleža was unwilling to adopt general skepticism, and he wanted to safeguard a minimal core of aesthetics (i.e., of specific skepticism).

A contradiction between the rejection of bourgeois aesthetics and of the avant-gardist challenge on the one hand – and, on the other, the pretension of safeguarding the aesthetic ideology and its institutions – is also characteristic of Soviet socialist realism and the »new realism.« In socialist Yugoslavia after the break with cultural »dogmatism,« the artistic mainstream avoided this contradiction by embracing the bourgeois aesthetics entrenched in national cultural institutions (Pantić 2018).

4 Partisan literature: a post-bourgeois artistic practice

On the margin of the »conflict on the left« and against the background of anti-bourgeois general skepticism, Slovenian social writers subjected aesthetic ideology itself to aesthetic secondary elaboration. They exposed the blind spot of aesthetic ideology, the sociohistorical determination of artistic practices, and subjected it to reflexively conceived procedures of artistic re-elaboration.

Progressive and revolutionary writers were refusing the established literary forms and would have logically opted for avant-garde procedures. However, they were aware that they could not address the masses with avant-garde extravagance. Blocked by this impossibility, they reverted to the forms disseminated among the masses by the dominant ideology, to the material of school literature, and to forms of popular devotion.

However, prewar »social art« remained enclosed within the small world of the »educated public,« where its work on the dominant ideological forms was understood as stylistic moderation, »concreteness,« and loyalty to tradition. It was only with the armed resistance and revolution that the problem of how to reach the masses imposed

3 In Yugoslavia, modernism was additionally discredited by the »modernist intimist aestheticism« being officially promoted by the proto-fascist Yugoslav regime after the January 6th dictatorship in 1929 (Pantić 2014, 2019c).

itself with urgency. In a very short time, Partisan artistic practices retraced the itinerary of prewar »social art« and reached beyond its limitations.⁴

Partisan artistic practices radicalized their attitude and, while occasionally still working on ideological forms of the school apparatus, they turned toward »popular« forms.

5 Artistic practices in socialism

In the socialist period, there were at least two outstanding types of appropriation of cultural forms. One strategy was the straight adoption of international literary trends. The other strategy was the import of international mass culture fashions. The appropriation of existentialist dramatic procedures in the work of Primož Kozak is examined first, and then the rearticulation of punk rock in the Yugoslav alternative scene.

5.1 Straight import

Primož Kozak was an outstanding member of the »critical generation,« the group that, according to Lev Kreft (1998: 147), proposed the program of »direct democracy and social self-management.«⁵ He was an author of Yugoslav relevance⁶ and arguably the best dramatist of the socialist period in Slovenia.

Kozak makes Sartrean existential agonistic dialogue the aesthetic principle of his plays. However, he appropriates it as a strictly aesthetic procedure, only after having first emptied it of its ideological content. In a critique of Sartre's *Huis clos*, Kozak (1950) approvingly analyzed Sartre's art, contrasting it against his philosophy, which for Kozak only expressed the cultural dead end of the European bourgeoisie.

It should be noted that Kozak's procedure belongs to the modern (»bourgeois«) cultural apparatus. The existence of bourgeois culture depends upon its being ideologically perceived as an autonomous sphere. Its elements are produced and reproduced as being »independent« from their sociohistorical conditions of possibility. Kozak's procedure contrasts with the practice of the »social art« of the 1930s that rearticulated canonical aesthetic »forms« to break out of the cultural closure. Adopting Sartrean dramaturgical procedures, Kozak reproduces them as »cultural forms,« as elements of the bourgeois autonomous sphere of culture, and in this way he reproduces the very bourgeois character he denounces in these same elements, taken as ideological forms.⁷

4 For an extensive discussion of Yugoslav Partisan art, see the thematic block in *Slavica tergestina* 17 (Habjan, Kim 2016) and Miletić and Radovanović (2016).

5 The group reached their apogee in their journal *Perspektive* (1960–1964). For a historical analysis, see Centrih (2009); for a critical presentation of historiographical accounts of the journal and the group, see Močnik (2015).

6 *Afera*, the prize for the best staging at the Sarajevo Festival of Small Stages, 1961; prize for the text of *Kongres* at the Sterijino Pozorje theater festival, 1969; first prize at the competition of the Yugoslav Television for *Direktor*, 1970; Prešern Fund Prize for the travelogue *Peter Klepec v Ameriki*, 1973.

7 See Kozak's plays: *Dialogi* (1958), *Afera* (1961), *Kongres* (1968), and *Legenda o svetem Che* (1969).

Consequently, the prevailing opinion (Kermauner 1998; Kreft 1998) that Kozak's dramas artistically formulate a left critique of post-revolutionary domination that was presumably the general sociopolitical project of his group seems inadequate. Characteristically unable to formulate a political alternative to the practices of post-revolutionary domination,⁸ the »critical generation« engaged in purely cultural, predominantly literary practices, thus continuing the nineteenth-century model of »cultural critique« based on *belles lettres*.⁹

Social art and Partisan art appropriated bourgeois aesthetic and folkloristic clichés in order to submit them to the aesthetic secondary elaboration from the perspective of emancipatory politics. Kozak, on the other hand, took Sartrean dramaturgy as a »cultural form,« as if, by being appropriated as an ideologically neutral aesthetic procedure, it could have been separated from its structural determination (in Kozak's own terms: from its »bourgeois blockade«). Kozak practiced a pre-avant-garde notion of »culture« as reservoir of presumably timeless values disconnected from their sociocultural conditions of production. In Kozak's dramas, as in the works of the »critical generation« in general, the cultural sphere was reestablished in its autonomy, whereas the achievements of the avant-gardes, of the social and Partisan artistic practices, were lost.

5.2 Strategic rearticulation

The cultural form of punk rock was imported naively, and its transfer into the Yugoslav popular music scene seemed an effect of the hegemony of the Western cultural industry. However, three features of this transfer are reminiscent of the appropriation of hegemonic ideological forms by the social literature of the 1930s.

1. Punk rock was radically appropriated in its sheer materiality: with the minimalism of its instrumentation and its practice of rough amateurism, it was easily adopted by culturally expropriated masses of Yugoslav youth. In Yugoslavia, punk rock may have been the first youth mass culture produced from the bottom up, and maybe even the first cultural movement in absolute terms, where smaller cities and even provincial towns were successfully challenging metropolitan centers.
2. In addition to the popular and even proletarian dimension, paradoxically supported by an originally hegemonic and commercialized cultural form, Yugoslav punk rock is reminiscent of prewar social literature by being adopted by an emerging alternative scene. The »alternative,« as it self-identified, was an all-Yugoslav conglomerate of new social movements, independent political and cultural initiatives, independent media and journalism, theoretical production, un-orthodox entertainment venues, and so on. In addition to its artistic and theoretical output, the alternative was the social base of important political

8 Kreft (1998: passim) extensively discusses this inability or unwillingness, and he relates it to the specificities of Yugoslav socialism.

9 The »critical generation« was hegemonic in Slovenian culture until approximately 1968; its more or less distinct, albeit already anachronistic, presence persisted until the establishment of *Nova revija* in 1982.

achievements of the 1980s, especially, at least in Slovenia, of the effective freedom of expression from 1984 onward (Močnik 2021).

3. Yugoslav punk rock was the galvanizing element of a new popular culture that resulted from the self-organization of young people. In this, it went beyond the project of the 1930s social art, whose program (which was not really achieved) had been the construction of an authentic working-class culture. Punk rock and its concomitant alternative scene actually succeeded in producing a genuine *Yugoslav* »culture«: it carried in itself the promise of an alternative socialist future – had not its preconditions been destroyed together with the socialist federation.¹⁰

6 To conclude

The schematic ideas are summarized here. Every radical artistic practice has to deal with the dominant ideologies of its time. Those practices that are committed to radical sociohistorical transformation have to confront the repressive heritage in a double way: as an obstacle to artistic invention and as a constraint upon its socialization. The social art of the 1930s resolved this task by rearticulating traditional hegemonic cultural forms into a new artistic formation. During the Second World War, Partisan art radicalized the procedures invented by social art and abolished the bourgeois closure of the autonomous cultural sphere. In the practices of the postwar »critical generation,« the autonomous cultural sphere was reestablished, and the avant-gardist and revolutionary achievements were lost. Finally, in the specific Yugoslav context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the spontaneous appropriation of commercialized pop-cultural punk rock produced a new »bottom-up« and all-Yugoslav culture that was not destined to last.

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10 Within the limits of this article, it is not possible to analyze the contradictions that led certain groups and individuals of the Yugoslav rock and punk rock scene to adopt reactionary positions in the late 1980s and later. These later developments justify, for example, the following acerbic criticism: »The punk of the eighties was anti-regime, anti-communist. [...] However, our 'punks' understood anarchism on the level of the petty bourgeois semantics: as chaos« (Zadnikar 2004: 210).

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