

# OLD HUNGARIAN AVANT-GARDE – NEW POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS?

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This paper is not a scholarly discussion, but rather a political pamphlet. In many respects it is an ideological type of paper, slightly provocative, ironic, critical and self-critical but certainly ideological. Ideological at least in that the Hungarian, East European avant-garde and their reception are interwoven with ideology – even if their enduring values are of an aesthetic and artistic nature. I would like to speak about political problems as well, though I myself am engaged neither in practical nor in theoretical politics. I feel obliged to penetrate this dangerous problem area for two reasons: firstly, in defence of the values of East-European art, and secondly, because the changes between 1989 and 1991 compel me to do so.

Every expert is well aware (as S. A. Mansbach explicitly expressed in his recent article)<sup>1</sup> that Lajos Kassák was offended by the authorities of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and later by the leading politicians of the Hungarian Republic of Councils, that is by his fellow combatants, from Béla Uitz to Emil Szittyá. (In the “Kuriositäten-Kabinett” Szittyá accused Kassák of writing “hymns” praising Tibor Szamuely – a blatant lie, incidentally.) Kassák was also persecuted by the cultural authorities, and even by the police of interwar Hungary, by the Moscow émigrés and by the communist régime which gained power after 1949. It is also a well-known fact that not long before his death, as a writer he was awarded the Kossuth Prize but as an artist he was expelled into the group of the “tolerated”. This label was the invention of the cultural authorities of the Kádár-era: In Kassák’s case the three T-s (standing for support, tolerate and prohibit, each beginning with a “T” in Hungarian) meant that he was granted the opportunity to exhibit his works only in a minor gallery after several years of waiting and he himself had to stand the costs of the exhibition. (True, he was refunded in the end.)

Even in the seventies Kassák was (and perhaps still is) considered an amateur by some Hungarian art historians, who also disregarded several activist artists, including László Moholy-Nagy, because they had worked abroad after 1919 for certain periods of time. For us today, this is an almost

unforgivable mistake in two respects. One is that in Hungarian public collections no or very few of their significant works can be found. The other one is that according to recent laws any of them could be considered a Hungarian citizen and, in turn, their *oeuvres* part of the national heritage.

Practically everybody tried to take advantage of Kassák and the early avant-garde artists for their political or ideological goals. Just to mention two extreme examples: on the one hand, I heard opinions stating that Kassák, who had arrived at art from a proletarian family living in Angyalföld, the poorest workers' district in Budapest, was the guard of Hungarian folk-lore traditions. On the other hand, with regard to his behavior, he was regarded more Jewish than those avant-garde artists who had been born Jews and he behaved this way on account of his Gentile origin.

As a matter of fact, our generation has also monopolized Kassák and the early avant-garde since the sixties. As the artists and critics of the "new" avant-garde, we wanted him to demonstrate the continuity of the socially committed avant-garde but instead, we were attached the pejorative label "neo-avant-garde". In other words, we were accused of being decadent imitators by those who, inside the hierarchy of György Aczél's cultural dictatorship, tried to defend Kassák's "true socialism" (as well as their own positions). Let me give just two examples for this type of conflict. At the beginning of the eighties Miklós Erdély, the leading personality of the new avant-garde art, was refused a passport because he had been charged with pouring red paint over Kassák's canvases in his exhibition in Düsseldorf. (*Nota bene*, Erdély never visited Düsseldorf. When he discovered the origin of this gossip, it turned out that the authorities had mixed him up for Tibor Hajas who had worked with blue paint in his own performance in Belgium. And what is more, Erdély was told: "Aren't you ashamed to tell lies about a dead artist?") In 1977 I was awarded the Kassák Prize by the Magyar Műhely (Hungarian Workshop) in Paris, whose members have been enthusiastic cultivators of Kassák's spiritual heritage. The Cultural Ministry was reluctant to let me travel to Paris for the award ceremony because the Hungarian writers and poets living abroad had just begun to criticize the official Hungarian cultural policy.

Today we are allowed to speak about anything. Very carefully, though. Partly because many of the former opponents of the avant-garde retained their positions in the new political régime in spite of the recent changes in East Europe, but also because there is an ideological danger that the "new democracies" of East Europe might accuse avant-garde art of bolshevism (cosmopolitanism, liberalism, etc.), due to its well-known leftist features, and therefore might throw them off the bandwagon.

Despite the dangerous implications, I would like to make everyone conscious of the most recent dangers. If in the newly united Germany the idea to have Bertold Brecht off the theater programs because of his leftistness can occur, if in Slovakia avant-garde artists can be accused of collaboration with the police just because they used to be interrogated by the police, if in Hungary attempts have been made to remove street signs bearing the name of the poet Endre Ady, as well as that of *European* thinker and art patron Lajos Hatvany, then better safe than sorry. The interpretations of the notion of “national value” carry not only implicit dangers but as they have become the focus of real discussions, they also imply, reviving the long forgotten debate between “urban and rural”, though new categories are attached to them today.

The evaluation of Kassák, Hungarian activism or even the whole East European avant-garde has not been facilitated by a recent hypothesis which argues that the social utopia formulated on an artistic level in Russian avant-garde paradoxically was realized in Stalin’s totalitarian dictatorship. This is one, and a very simplified, interpretation of Boris Groys’ witty book, entitled *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, but a similar statement has already been implicated by Tom Wolfe’s famous or notorious criticism of the Bauhaus. In both cases post-modernists negate avant-garde. But isn’t it rather that as “leftism is the children’s disease of communism”, so is “rightism the children’s disease of post-modern thinking”? To what extent can we still accept the recognition, which used to be a revelation, then more and more a triviality, that in the structure of power and representation of Hitler’s Third Reich and Stalin’s Soviet Union similar mechanisms were functioning? Can Friedrich Nietzsche be considered the forerunner of fascism as Georg Lukács stated in his *Destruction of Reason*? It was the same Lukács who was once the patron of avant-garde, then the commissar of the Hungarian Republic of Councils, but at the same time the ideological opponent of Béla Kun and Tibor Szamuely, just like Lajos Kassák.

There are innumerable painful questions, inferior only to one question of a moral nature. What is more ethical: to change our point of view due to an assumed or real truth (or simply in the hope of survival), or to stick to our mistake?

Avant-garde art stood on a moral basis, therefore, its assessment could not dispense with a moral slant either. Post-modern thinking is neutral to values, disregards questions of a moral type and above all its interest is targeted at aesthetic effectiveness. In awareness of this, it can be understood that Socialist Realism, which has an effective repertoire, is more alive than ever, even when resorting to irony (think of contemporary Soviet art), and even if the avant-garde has invariably struggled against it to its last breath. It can also be

understood that Hungarian artists like Gábor Bachman, László Rajk and their fellow-artists, in their very effective and truly up to date art, can strengthen the elements of Kassák's activism and constructivism by means of Socialist Realist pathos. *From this point of view* it would be obvious if the oeuvres of those artists who denied their early avant-gardism (like Aurél Bernáth, Pál Pátzay, Béni Ferenczy or the writer Gyula Illyés) or those who have never been avant-gardists (like István Szőnyi) could simply be put in the category of trans-avant-garde.

But what shall we do about the oeuvre of Sándor Bortnyik, who denied his avant-garde past too late, and then, towards the end of his life – too late again – began to reproduce his early works? Or what about Béla Uitz, who never denied his major works of activism but, during the years he had spent in the Soviet Union, gradually became a convinced Socialist Realist? Finally, what should we think about Lajos Kassák who *never denied himself*?

In any case, we have to revise and re-evaluate each oeuvre. But by no means, should we do this in order to brand them again as “bolshevik” or “communist sympathizer” and condemn them “for ever”. However we have to do this because we have been given the first opportunity to be able to examine their works freely. And we must do this to understand their individual motives in their historical context. We have to understand why Moholy-Nagy was able to write that “constructivism was neither proletarian nor capitalist” and why a witness remembered so well that with Moholy's help he could save his parents' apartment from seizure in 1919. Further, why the idealist Ervin Sinkó, author of *Optimists* and *A Novel of a Novel* came to the conclusion that he couldn't trust either Western communists or the ones living in the Soviet Union or at home (in the Vojvodina, formerly Yugoslavia), and why these two novels were published only with an incredibly long time-lag in Hungary. Why Kassák's autobiography – for similar reasons – had to be published and why, the monograph of Béla Kun written by a Marxist author as late as the eighties had to be withdrawn right after its publication? Why Pál Demény (brother of Ottó Demény, a member of Kassák's circle) had to spend more than half of his lifetime in various prisons just because his compatriots, who were on intimate terms with the Comintern, did not trust him (neither did he trust them)? Why one of the most gifted filmmakers, György Gerő could be “saved” from prison, a future held for him because of his communist relations, only through his parents declaring him a neurotic (he was put into a private hospital where all traces of him was lost)? Why Béla Balázs, on returning home from the Soviet Union in 1945, had to fall out of favour (just like his friend, Sergei Eisenstein, in his homeland)? Why representatives of leftist socio-photography made genres of folk-lore, “capitalist” photos for advertisements and report-

photos loyal to the Horthy regime, all at the same time? How come that Boriska Zsigmondi, who had made shocking socio-photos in interwar Slovakia, could be mixed up in the show trial of László Rajk in Hungary? How László Péri, emigrating to England, was supported by circles of communist sympathizers and leftists? How was it possible that János Mátza living in the Soviet Union was able to preserve his position throughout his lifetime (inspite of the fact that he popularized avant-garde art)? How could Máté Major, who had belonged to the Group of Socialist Artists, and followed Bauhaus principles, in the most severe years of the fifties insist on his views even against József Révai in the debate on Socialist Realist architecture, and later, as an academician, “loyal” to the regime, could help progressive art...?

We should also understand, that those who became the experts of East European avant-garde, had partly come from the same artistic movement and they had been inspired by the leftist ideals of '68, and were opposing official art and they were strenuously driven for modernism.

I am speaking about a need for political and ideological reevaluation, but we are still in a transitional period when the future of Central-Eastern Europe remains to be seen. Over all of us who live there hangs the monster of nationalism, but we must be aware that scarcely any of the avant-garde artists were nationalists. From among the nationalist conflicts there seems to be only one way out. Which is European integration and which at the same time equals market economy, that is capitalism. However, avant-gardists were anti-capitalists. Perhaps the “bridge” which they wanted to build, a “third way” is not to be rejected as such together with their “bolshevism”.

#### Notes

1. “From Leningrad to Ljubljana: The Suppressed Avant-Gardes of East-Central and Eastern Europe during the Early Twentieth Century.” *Art Journal*, Spring, 1990. Vol. 49, No. 1. pp. 7–8; “Confrontation and Accomodation in the Hungarian Avant-Garde”, *ibid.* pp. 9–20.