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From the *Discipline of the Whole* to the *Art of Concentration*: Revisions of the Eastern and Central European Avant-Gardes: Review¹

Avant-garde – a psychological and sociological phenomenon, a “state of the spirit,” an existential situation, a style of thinking about the world firmly grounded in the modern era, “the engine of artistic transgression” (Dziamski, 1995, p. 7), the elementary form of modernist practices, a general term for twentieth-century artistic movements, a new life-style. Surely, “avant-garde” is a term replete with multiple, often contradictory meanings. Avant-garde is also a phenomenon irreducible to a homogeneous style-form, one whose character is rather pluralistic, its inherent feature being a concomitance of multiple artistic currents, of which none managed to gain predominance over others. Among those widely known, one could name Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, yet also the more ephemeral ones, such as Synthetism or Impulsionism. The local avant-gardes developed their own variants of the above mentioned tendencies – the Czech Poetism or the

¹ *Awangarda Środkowej i Wschodniej Europy – Innowacja czy naśladownictwo? Interpretacje*, ed. Michalina Kmieciak, Małgorzata Szumna, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2015, 355 pp. (Kmieciak & Szumna, 2015). *Głuchy brudnopis: Antologia manifestów awangardy Europy Środkowej*, ed. Jakub Kornhauser, Kinga Siewior, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2015, 578 pp. (Kornhauser & Siewior, 2015).

Balkan Zenithism, with the tenets of which we can acquaint ourselves in respective passages of the *Deaf Sketchbook* (Kornhauser & Siewior, 2015). To what extent do the local incarnations of the avant-garde currents deviate from their Russian or German prototypes? What does the “locality” of the avant-garde consist in? Do any relationships emerge which would connect the local avant-garde directions into one?

Awangarda/rewizje, the new scholarly series of the Jagiellonian University Press, which ventures to answer those and many other questions, is an outcome of the research project “The avant-garde of the Eastern and Central Europe – innovation or emulation?” The project, pursued at the Faculty of Polish Studies of the Jagiellonian University as a part of the National Program for the Advancement of Humanities under the patronage of the Ministry of the Interior, is devoted to the history of the avant-garde in this part of Europe. It presents works from the field of studies that is the twentieth-century European avant-garde, understood as an esthetic, artistic, cultural and social phenomenon. The eponymous “revisions” shall be applied to the hitherto accepted historical-literary narrative concerning the phenomenon of the avant-garde.

The series *awangarda/rewizje* was inaugurated with two tomes: *The Deaf Sketchbook. An anthology of Eastern European avant-garde manifestos*, edited by Jakub Kornhauser and Kinga Siewior (Kornhauser & Siewior, 2015), and the collectively authored *Avant-garde of Eastern and Central Europe – innovation or emulation? Interpretations*, edited by Michalina Kmiecik and Małgorzata Szumna (Kmiecik & Szumna, 2015).

The Deaf Sketchbook, as noted by the authors in the introduction, is an anthology housing the manifestos of “minor” or “non-paradigmatic” avant-gardes (Czech, Slovakian, Yugoslavian, Romanian), providing an outline their relationships with the Western European as well as Russian models, and presenting the main transformational axes in the theories of different avant-gardes. It constitutes a selection of the most important manifestos and programmatic texts of the historical Central European avant-gardes, at the same time depicting the most interesting currents within them: the Czech Poetism and Artificialism, the Yugoslavian Zenithism and Hipnism, the Romanian Integralism – culminating with Surrealism, which was undergoing an intense development throughout the whole region. The anthology presents texts penned by the practitioners and the theoreticians of the avant-garde since the beginning of the 1920s to the latter half of the 1940s.

It bears mentioning that *The Deaf Sketchbook* is an unprecedented undertaking, seeing that the authors assembled an impressive body of texts, translated and edited the selected material, providing the reader with

a valuable source for studying both the avant-garde and the respective national literatures.

“Locality,” chronological secondariness and geographical peripherality determine the criteria of choosing the texts for the anthology. What does this entail? Of utmost interest is the attitude of said local avant-gardes (e.g. Czech or Romanian) to the Great Avant-Garde, an attitude related to their peripheral status with regards to other wings of the avant-garde movement – the Western European and Russian ones. Owing to the new, frequently first ever, Polish translations of the manifestos, we can trace the solidification process of the local avant-gardes, and consider whether the transformations enacted within this process are in some ways analogical to the transformations of the Western European/The Great Avant-Garde.

Reading the texts by Karel Teige, Rade Drainac, Gellu Naum reinforces our opinion that writing a manifesto acted as a realization of the slogan “artlife-action,” while the manifesto itself served as one of the main carriers of avant-garde concepts, acquiring manifold forms and at times coming close to functioning as a strongly persuasive announcement. Questions arise: whence this proclivity to manifestos? Why manifestos? Manifestos as a form of expression demonstrating independence and autonomy? This enables us to consider the poetics of the manifesto and the programmatic essay. Moreover, among the main tendencies signaled in the manifestos and utterances we come across the initiatory role of the avant-garde critical practice, which emphasizes the postulatory and persuasive function of the text.

Thanks to the effort of the translators and editors, we are able to follow the developmental trajectory of the “new art” in those days’ Czechoslovakia (text selection, translation and edition by Hanna Marciniak), Yugoslavia (text selection, translation and edition by Agata Kocot and Kinga Siewior), and Romania (text selection, translation and edition by Jakub Kornhauser), and thus familiarize ourselves with the “peripheral” avant-gardes, those dwelling between Russia and the West, with the birth of avant-garde movements and currents in Eastern and Central Europe, with the mechanisms of introducing the avant-garde.

As for the exclusion/absorption/transformation of the traditionally delineated avant-garde currents in Eastern and Central Europe, this subject is elaborated upon by the authors of the texts included in the tome *Avant-garde of Eastern and Central Europe – innovation or emulation? Interpretations*, edited by Michalina Kmieciak and Małgorzata Szumna (2015).

We are granted a chance to look into the method based on artistic gestures of negation as conceived by the authors of the esthetical and ethical

revolution in the areas that are peripheral – as seen from the vantage point of the “great avant-garde movements” of Western and Eastern Europe – and thus are subjected to an unwarranted marginalization in the critical literary discourse. The perspective proposed here, then, takes into account the local conditions as well as cosmopolitan inspirations influencing the local movements, accentuates the originality and diversity stemming from conceptions of individual authors and theoreticians but also the borrowings from the great resources of European avant-garde imagery. In effect, the tome prompts us to take a fresh look at the history of the “exotic avant-gardes” of Central Europe.

Rosalind Krauss, in her essay *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, writes as follows:

The avant-garde artist has worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic. He has also preached a variety of creeds. One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality. [...] More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. [...] The claims of the avant-garde [...] claims to originality (Krauss, 1986, p. 157).

In *Avant-garde and Kitsch*, Clement Greenberg notes that “the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence” (Greenberg, 1939, p. 36 [original emphasis]). Greenberg moreover introduces the category of imitation – claiming namely that the avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating (Greenberg, 1939, p. 37)... This in turn strikes at the avant-garde mythology of originality and creativeness. The avant-garde: originality, difference, innovativeness and autonomy, or continuity and emulation – is the problem which receives consideration at the hands of M. Kmiecik in the chapter *The Theory of Central and Eastern European Avant-Garde and the Problem of Repetition*.

At the end of the 1970s, there appears a trans-avant-garde, going beyond the avant-garde. Rosalind Krauss draws attention to a certain avant-garde discourse, which she terms the “discourse of originality” (Krauss, 1986, p. 168), while younger avant-garde movements (the above-mentioned trans-avant-garde) seem to attack and transgress said originality and novelty. The way literary critique in this part of Europe reacted to the neo-avant-garde movements and the place it allotted them in the cultural field is described by authors including Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka, Leszek Engelking, Hanna Marciniak, Agnieszka Karpowicz, or Emilliano

Ranocchi, who touches upon the avant-garde of post-modernity. Jerzy Jarzębski subjected to analysis the poem *Maggi* by Jerzy Jankowski, precursory with regards to Polish avant-garde movements, while Andrzej Szczerski described the modernizations of the avant-garde era.

The avant-garde and modernism appear to be closely related concepts, two currents sharing certain denominators. Scholars to date have pointed out that modernism enjoys an overriding status compared to avant-garde, yet it is exactly in the avant-garde practices where the modernist postulates are fulfilled, so that the phenomenon of the avant-garde constitutes an essential feature of modernism. The relationship between the avant-garde and modernity is analyzed by Jan Balbierz, who describes the multimedia genealogies of modernism. Agnieszka Korniejenko, Jakub Kornhauser, Olga Bartosiewicz and Jolanta Sujecka took up the cosmopolitanism and the locality of the avant-garde. Aleksandra Surdykowska deals for her part with the Russian avant-garde and its influence on the movement's Polish variant. The authors study the philosophical, sociological and historical bases of the phenomenon and bring to light the most crucial and the marginal properties – both formal and conceptual – of the avant-garde art.

The essays included in the tome attempt to answer the question of the avant-garde's position in the prevailing discourse, its placement in the generally respected timelines, and how to look anew at the rather entrenched image of the phenomenon. In the European and the Anglo-American literary critique, the term "avant-garde" carries different connotations and is used with a multitude of senses (and frequently inherently contradictory ones at that) – the authors of the respective texts ask whether any sort of coherent object emerges from the different avant-gardes of Eastern and Central Europe. Can one speak of a particular character of the Central European avant-gardes?

The two tomes are an ambitious and original attempt to reconstruct the history of avant-garde in Eastern and Central Europe, an attempt to create a congruent theory of the avant-garde from the Europe of the Middle and to answer the question of commonality of this Europe's experiences. The translations and critical-historical discussions try to make accessible to the readers the most inspiring theoretical propositions, new interpretations of the avant-garde concepts and texts, with a special attention given to the history and the peculiarities of Eastern and Central European avant-gardes. It seems as if the authors were guided by the paramount question of whether it is possible to think of the sundry avant-gardes of this part of Europe as a coherent artistic current, and where its distinctness from the Western and Russian models would chiefly lie.

In *Post-Modern Art, or the Impossibility of the Avant-Garde*, Zygmunt Bauman writes that “it does not make much sense to speak of the avant-garde in the postmodern world” (Bauman, 1997, p. 95). These impressive two tomes leave the reader with multiple ideas for new readings of avant-gardes, with a wealth of reflections opening new horizons, and with a felt confirmation that in today’s cultural landscape, one can certainly discern “the need for the avant-garde.”

In Peter Bürger’s take, the avant-garde is the moment of “revolutionary awakening,” “a self-criticism of art in the bourgeoisie society” (Bürger, 1974, p. 26), which did not lead, however, to a destruction of art, but to an act of rebuilding – a fundamental change, a revolutionizing of basic notions, a conferral of a new identity onto art. A similar intent seems to direct the series *awangarda/rewizje*.

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Note

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