

A Melancholy Quest For the Reason

A Proposal for the Peripheral Theory of Avant-Garde

INTRODUCTION:

The fact that it is not possible to step into same modernity twice makes a modern life particularly elusive and difficult for emotional and intellectual understanding. At the onset of the 1980's, it took Marshall Berman to elegantly, with great clarity, point out the 'other nature' of modernist art production, indeed —a melancholy face of the activists' angry commitment. Berman had done it on the example of Baudelaire's essays on visual art while attempting —along the analysis of other Martian malady giant interpreters of reality (Goethe, Marx, Dostoevsky) —to point the fluidity and the perpetually elusive character of modernity as categories that, doubtless, provoke reactions in every slightly sensitive individual (1.). Berman's critical narrative about the 'experience of modernity' is, in good measure, a diagnostics of the **"illness" in** emotional engagement of many artists that have attempted to understand, explain and change the order of things in the grinding process of industrial modernization. As it has been described nearly thirty years after the Berman's study, in an attempt of general historical reconstruction of the role of melancholy in culture, particularly in relation to modernism —the sad 'black bile, the *cholera nigra* — has not been only physiological, but also

psychological and creative fact, almost a worldview. (2.). On the concrete example of Baudelaire, surely not isolated, but clearest, Pinsky decidedly avers that “melancholy artwork, from Baudelaire onward, is largely read as palimpsest, a simultaneous destruction and reconstruction of an object, of a theme” (3.); this ambivalent relation, a dualism of simultaneous love and hate, attraction and repulsion presents a chunky bit of foundation for the creative strategies in a modernist artistic production, particularly in the segment known by the concept of “historical avant-garde”. An assemblage as a reconstruction of reality, a Ready Made as an ironic deconstruction of the same, the working of various meanings of mass culture from Duchamp down to Warhol (both of them were spiritual sons of Baudelaire), explorations in the media of photography and film, multimedia events, “the art of noise”, politics as medium...all these are creative procedures that reflect the bittersweet, ghostly attractive beauty of modern life in the perception of those sickened by “poetic melancholy” —“melancholie mauvaise” (4.). Street music, noise of a machine, chaos of an advertisement, car speed, loneliness of a night in the city. Political manipulation, revolution, poetry, love, sex. Is it truly possible, despite the background of mighty activism, manifestoes, and proclamations, to discover a melancholy sickness in the action of historical avant-garde that was the cradle of modernist art? Does the emphatic nature of public show actually hide a shade of solitary melancholy? Is the fascination with future actually a form of escapism, a dissatisfaction with real life, and an affinity for an artificial paradise? Can we possibly read “melancholy as a method”, as brilliantly proposed by Flatley, even though this seemingly

contradictory thought indeed offers a fact of melancholy auto-reflection for anyone who, with dark circles under eyes, at night observes the city at sleep (5.). Does a double coded idea such as this form the basis for some new melancholy narrative on modernity?

DARK AVANT-GARDE

At the beginning of the paper, we marked the position of the avant-garde as important. Is it possible today to still use **the concept of avant-garde in theoretical discourse** and remain sufficiently **convincing in communication** In the era of broken modernist centers, the dominant idea of social-economic progress has been dispersed into an infinite number of local narratives —it seems that it is now necessary to use a lot of grounding in order for **concepts** like “avant-garde” and “of avant-garde” to carry the original meaning (6.). But, maybe it is a different meaning altogether?

For the purposes of our understanding **of** melancholy as a creative and aesthetic phenomenon, the adequate framework for an attempt in describing the nature of avant-garde would surely have to incorporate the following thematic wholes: the **concept of** avant-garde; **progress** as an idea and **modernization** as a process; the idea of modernity; the relationship between collective and individual; in the end, art as the sum of visual facts, and design as a system of identities, both of them as communication models. (7.)

The **concept of** avant-garde is historically limited. It is tied to the very foundation of bourgeois democracy, to the idea of an individual as a carrier of cultural transformation. These transformations intensified

during the industrial modernization period on the wave of mass-production and consumption. The **concept of** avant-garde —i.e. what today we understand as a practice in a concrete historical time — becomes more complex with the considerable dynamics. (8.) The dynamics that point to the difference, which, for example, differentiates modern from traditional, culture and is marked by its long-standing stylistic formations. Speaking from the strict theoretical point, the avant-garde as a category is written into different modes of activity within community, in its relation to individual and collective identity. This level of corresponding, as the creative basis for artistic activity, has become quite neglected in the interpretative horizon of the theories of modern and contemporary art.

In the practice of different social sciences, however, it has become common to discuss the avant-garde as a succession of artistic movements —primarily in architecture, art and literature, ranging from the last quarter of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century. Stricter critical historians would even narrow the range, as they disagree over the categories, despite the fact that the majority would assent to the statement that time of historical avant-gardes has passed away. (9.) Because the connection of art to social and political projects had completely changed its focus in the past fifty plus years. We should not forget that the attribute of avant-garde was also closely linked to the corresponding ideological activities.

In that sense the **concept of** avant-garde points to the relation between the **progress** as an idea and **modernization** processes. We should remind that the modernizing efforts had established a sufficient basis for the setup of an idea of economic development as

primary social category. In that respect, the notion of **progress**, practically from the first use of steam engine in manufacturing, and from the French bourgeois revolution — has been projected into various social spheres, from the narrowly understood politics to the arts. Along the way, the key element remained the mechanistic notion of a world as an endless machine production that constantly must increase the quantity of products in order to satisfy the demand of increased populations. (10.) But maybe it is the other way around—the demand preceding the production? The process of Western modernization, i.e. of the perfecting of capitalism as a new bourgeois formation, established **progress** as a completely new ecological fact, both in respect to natural and social environment. The resources of exploitation, in the **progressive** philosophy of society, included (and still includes) all that is natural (including man) and all that, through the constant modernizing effort, becomes transformed into its artificial forms: mass products and artworks (11.)

Between the modernizing efforts and avant-garde visions, there certainly exists a correlation which can at the same time be named accepting and resisting, i.e. which, as a type, describes the avant-garde art as modernist reaction to modernizing processes, through the simultaneous **link** of attraction and repulsion, while accepting and radically criticizing the values of a modernized culture. In the gap between the effort and the resistance, with the Baudelaire-like idea of modern life constructed upon fascination and contempt —modernity emerged as a resultant and endless storage space for ideas and concepts — **from utopias and dystopias** to the anti-globalist movement of today. Can we possibly **compare** modernity as a

phenomenon to some more permanent artistic attitude? Not very easily, we should say. Due to the continuous nature, indeed —the progressiveness of processes that instigate modernity — the contents that are thus (through resistance) established are themselves in continual fluxus. (12.). That is why it is so pleasant and painful to experience **progress**, so fleeting, because we cannot “step twice in the same modernity”. And the sad fleeting experience thus become much more apparent. The idea of modernity, however, is primarily literary; despite the fact that today we can observe it on different levels of cultural production. The **concept of** avant-garde within the phenomenon of modernity, is likely the most productive segment of an already historical narrative about the making of the modern Western culture. It is so because in the short historical period —from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century —so many new contents were created in comparison to the former centuries — following the Morus’ idea about “a century in which there would have been more history than ever before”. And more precisely —the awareness of history and cultural production (13.)

As this awareness was largely instigated by an enormous growth of the mass media, as yet another outlet for the modernizing process, so did the contemporary avant-garde tendencies in culture from visionary acts turned to facts of common culture presented in the mass produced monographs, today ubiquitously present through the varying strategies of mass communication. The post-industrial culture, the often-called post-Fordism of economy, emphasizes the symbolic value of a product as its most important (14). On this level of functionality, the former art avant-garde experiments have become

part and parcel of the general cultural repertory. Did this make the identity of individuals who as artists operated within the context of the ideologically conceived industrial modernization —any clearer? Who were they and what they experienced? How they responded to the modernizing efforts, and how they created the elements of resistance? Where is their profile, their “black bile” of their works which, today, represent the general legacy of human culture?

LOCALIZING OF SADNESS

We will look for an answer, unexpectedly, in the superb melancholy theory representative, a man who never was involved with the avant-garde but who, paradoxically, had offered us theoretical tools that **could** clarify the relationship between avant-garde and melancholy. Almost half a century has passed since the publication of Ljubo Karaman's study "On the **Influence** of **local context** in the art of Croatian regions" —and due to immense changes within cultural politics, cultural production, art theories and paradigms, notwithstanding the changes in social, political and economical context from that time —some of Karaman's theses call for a new interpretation. These changes register on the levels of global and local social transition, while the relation of universal to particular, an global to local in the production of visual contents, remain the immediate context to which the new interpretation of Karaman's theses can be applied (15.). This changed context, the new level of the relation between general and individual, i.e. global and local in the exchange of visual contents, will be the focus of this hypothetical critical attempt. Certainly, in the original domain of Karaman's study, the one dealing with architecture and sculpture, his theses would and should today be actualized separately, but for our purposes we will deliberately change our focus. For two reasons. First, the parameters of architecture and sculpture today call for changed terminology because the time lapse from Karaman's study; the main attribute of the change is the profanation of architecture and sculpture in modern culture. Second, the relation between cultural politics and practices

had changed too, and —interestingly —this reconfiguring began right about the time of the publication of Karaman's study. Aware of the limitations of our theoretical essay, we propose, for further discussion, one of possible additions to the manner in which we reflect upon the theme of localized methodology when researching and interpreting the art production. In that respect, Karaman provides us with much momentum. To clarify the elements of the personal and melancholy within the general and creative, we can search for our complement within the Karaman theses about the localization of the global art subject matter. In his discourse, local is possibly read as —personal.

The macro mapping of what, territorially, is global and local, could metaphorically transfer on to the micro level; to the relation of general vs. individual, collective vs. personality, group identity vs. personal identity. For that reason, a changed intellectual position when researching visual arts and visual culture in general, will provide some interesting crossroads toward the Karaman's understanding of architecture and plastic arts of the middle ages; in other words, today's analyses of the visual are largely directed toward criticism of the relation between 'high' and 'low' culture, with the tendency to research art production locally (16.). The question of identity implied by Karaman's writing, meanwhile became one of the key theoretical focuses in the analysis of culture, cultural production and **visual arts**. This fact has become one of the more relevant constants of the critical and theoretical reflection on visual culture since 1990. With that in mind, it was not uncommon to critically regard the 'hegemony of **interpretation**', i.e. the dominant, centralized modernization

perspective in the construction of a narrative to do with art production and visual culture (17). Is it possible to have a new interpretive horizon —the one that would take into account the reversed perspective, from the periphery of the modernizing process to the center —thus heeding the Karaman’s ideas regarding the provincial, border and peripheral art production? In other words, would it be possible to understand the topographic localizing as a focus on emotional personality — the type of individualization within the context of the avant-garde collectivism?

Using the three main theses of Karaman I will attempt to find an answer to that question on several examples taken from the visual culture of the avant-garde. My intention is to open up the space for further critical discussion, perhaps even the application of such hypothetical method regarding the local culture based on further two disciplines that can, in part, be considered visual —one is more directly connected to the original interests of Karaman’s — architecture (in our case modern and contemporary) —while the other, more challenging, but also closely connected to local identity is the discipline of urban studies and planning. Leaving aside, for now, these two disciplines, it should be added that for the **operative** hypothesis, the concept of “avant-garde” is used not only to label the historical dimension in the production of visual communications. It expands to the realm that has escaped the “avant-gardeness”, and took umbrage, perhaps, under definition of modernism, at least partly —as historically completed process. Of course, the modernism is not only perceived as an aesthetic or style category but also as a social, political and economical context. In the case of the local Croatian

culture, a clearly completed period regarding the first era of liberal economy or the “first Croatian modernization”, but also the era of consensual economy and public ownership, i.e. the “second Croatian modernization” (18). The “completeness” of the social project has created particular circumstances for the review of a visual culture’s epoch. A discussion could, however, expand outside the realm of social and topographical toward the position of an individual as observed in the general project of modernity. Not merely definition of an epoch or a style, this discussion will aim clearly to the problem of an eventual interdisciplinary study of complex economical, political, and cultural image of the 20th century.

MELANCHOLY INTERNATIONAL

The new interpretative horizon lies in the fact that the modernizing process, as an instigator and generator of visual contents —on the level of economy, or on the [narrower \(ovo izbaciti\)](#) level of culture — creates a map of correlations between the local surroundings toward the centers of the process. For that reason, there exists between the center and the periphery, a permanently producing and productive networking i.e. an “exchangeability” as defined by Germann (19.). The creation of visual contents is thus an immediate expression of these correlations and an exchange of symbolical value recognized as traditional, contemporary or hybrid, according to Papastargiadis (20.).

Conversely, the local areas i.e. the culture of peripheries, has its unique character in relation to the modernizing centers, and this uniqueness is offered for a theoretical framework with the help of the Karaman's three main theses. On the psychological level of the exchange between general and individual, not infrequently we find the position of a double, a "doppelganger", speech of the other—the creative position and relation that is strongly present in many of the avant-garde artworks. The quoted "exchangeability" offers itself as a methodical tool in the very specific sense of apparent co-relations existing on the level of making of the visual contents. Not only because of the global, commercial industry of identity (**advertising**), but based on the fact that, in the narrower sphere of art production, the exchange of ideas today is truly global. Papastergiadis' main thesis, of course, aims at the correlation between traditional and contemporary, pre-modern and modern, manufactured and industrial production. In that respect it complements the initial idea of Karaman's. But, these "traditional, contemporary or hybrid" models of visual contents—serving as models for a main indicator—surely provide an initiative to establish one **eventual** typology of a kind that would help us establish the analytical models for the new interpretative horizons of visual contents. The latter would have been made in the local context from the period of the industrial modernization until today. The quoted "exchangeability" is a **fluid working** definition when discussing the relation between the creative individual and collective. With that in mind, the collective could represent a group of emotional partisans, but also a context reacted upon by some type of art intervention. This would imply taking part in

a collective identity, while projecting the elements of one's own identity into the environment. If the modern "poetic melancholy" is caused by the repeated, progressive shifting of a fixed point within the unstoppable process of modernization, than the "hybrid-nature" is perhaps a point of rupture between personal and collective; a schizophrenic notch in the abyss where an artist seeks darker impetuses for creation. In the reversed, rather hybrid-like, lens of Karaman's theses - the geographic uniqueness is possible as personal, while the peripheral character of a topographical area, serves as an extravagant model for author's creation.

THE EXPANDING OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The initial Karaman's thesis, about the **"innocent (naive) provincial proportions"** and "an impetus from cultural centers received in the framework of its own modest economic and social circumstances" (21), is observed and analyzed as a reflection of visual culture within direct social, economical and political context. The activity of Ljubomir Micić, provides a good example of how this "dark matter" provokes a rebellion against the established order of things. In other words, how even on the periphery of the Western Civilization, we encounter a personal stance on the collective values of both — center and the periphery of the civilization. The paradox of his worldview, its simultaneous internationalism and local radicalism, his positive stance toward those that he considered his partisans and contempt for others —metaphorically framed in the figure of **"barbarogenij" (genius barbarian)**—these contradictions are a good example of the

rift noticeable on every page of *Zenit*, from its early, inventive phase, to its later phases when the nationalist sentiment has become almost a part of Micic academic outlook.

The second Karaman's thesis, about the "diversity of forms in border areas" and "influence of the two widely differing art circles" (22) is proposed for an interpretation as a starting research point of the relation between the planned and the communicated in the visual information; i.e. the levels of content manipulation, either through the context of commercial or political communication. The relation was already alluded to, so it is logical to warn that this level of visual culture is directly connected to its mass reproduction and circulation with the goal of maintaining the mechanism of production and consumption, but also for the purpose of establishing and maintaining political power.

Several examples of the activity of Josip Seissel point to such "exchangeability" as work method; within his work the 'found' elements, parts of the existing reality are reordered and reused in communication in order to achieve an unforeseen result. The architecture of such communication creates fantastic realms of loneliness; i.e. Seissel in his collages suggests a forlorn individual lost in chaos of information. This is not unusual for an author who was later involved with urban studies **and planning**. In the topographical space that Seissel articulates, he finds a complement to the spiritual vacuity asking to be inhabited with content. And, sure enough, through his double, **his alter ego**, —Jo Klek —Seissel inhabits his own loneliness, i.e. he introduces the new protagonist and where left out of the image, the author strengthens the position

of the observer who is, at the same time, observed. Seissel also, from the depth of melancholy inspiration, registers the problems of the world following the horror of the World War I.

Similarly, Ivana Tomljenović Meller creates fascinating visions of empty metropolises, but also collages with incisive critical political messages. It is evident that urbanizing is one of the main levers of modernization; it is also a mass experience of political terror equally apparent as a tool for social changes. At the same time, love for the new together with repulsion against prejudice —these are definitely elements of the creative procedure that, without doubt, Tomljenović Meller developed under the influence of the liberal educational didactic at Bauhaus school. The peripheral surroundings, however, provided her international cosmopolitanism with a note of the socially responsive art. It is no coincidence that, on the streets of a big city, as seen by the author, we encounter no lonely pedestrian in the guise of her alter ego —a ‘doppelganger’ remains hidden in order to emphasize how much a personality withdraws facing the magnificent collectivism of a modernist project.

The third Karaman’s thesis —“freedom to create **in** the peripheral art” and “environment that, apart from leading culture centers, receives, appropriates and reworks the center’s multiple influences, and thus develops an independent art activity on its own soil” (23) —should be analyzed as authentic local theory that would correspond to the ideas that, under the definitions “alternative” (Craven) or “marginal” (Fry) modernism, became globally known some twenty years after the publication of Karaman’s study. Our discussion concludes with an

insight into the global actuality of Karaman's study regarding the later emergence of the post-colonial theory, visual studies and theory of design, i.e. those disciplines that, academically and intellectually, attempt to actualize the position of local as separate entity.

The Zagreb art group *Travelers* managed to fully unite the idea of topographically local and personal by welding life and art in the manner of a lifestyle **in early nineteen-twenties**. Through such concept, eventfulness can be observed as an existentialist-humorist transposition of life's essential uneasiness; *Travelers* have often turned their parties and travels, according to photo **documentation**, into happenings that were self-referential. The group's collages that have reworked the elements of reality can be interpreted as ironic criticism of circumstances of the industrial modernization; within the collages there were often concealed visual or verbal meanings alluding to concrete events. The ultimate significance was however left to authors. And finally, the multimedia aspect of *Travelers* creative interests, can today be read as an experimental provocation within the ironically manipulated elements of mass media culture. This pattern of the avant-garde activity, has been interpreted more or less successfully; regardless of the formal result, regarding the given of any individual intervention —it seems that the reconstruction of the given today demands a “customized” interpretative approach. An approach perhaps patterned on the basis of Ljubo Karaman's ideas, which already had had a similar annex in the notion that his basic definitions are but “synchronous variant of the problem of overlapping and interference among generations” (25). In other words, it is the new interpretation that is the key to the spatial-temporal continuum.

For that reason, these elements now propose a new reading of the avant-garde creative methods in the key of “poetic melancholy” —the latter as the tool for the understanding and application of reality.

CONCLUSION

Our conclusion is offered in the manner of an open-ended structure with space for an interpretive expansion; the analyzed examples and proposed theoretical positions should serve to instigate a methodological framework which can interpret the unique nature of the avant-garde melancholy through visual forms. It should be based on the theory of peripheral modernization areas where visual contents are made as the foundation, where we can observe the relation between individual and general, i.e. where critical evaluation of the individual’s feeling towards the collectivist nature of industrial modernization **could be applied**. For that reason, the hypothetical **peripheral particularities are** semiotic situation reflecting the contextual givens —either in hybrid form of local and global provenance, or as a communication structure that, consciously or not, interprets the tradition (26). These, then, are the specifics of the identity type, i.e. creative procedures with the potential to evaluate and build cultural identity in a local environment. In the same way, individual specifics might add to the spotting of general characteristics, and qualities of the melancholy worldview arising from industrial modernization. In the words of the poetic British authors from the beginning of the 1980’s —“Crushed by the wheels of industry” (27) —a bittersweet indicator of the state of continual

acceptance and rejection that are caused by modernization's soul-grinder.

NOTES:

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Ljubo Karaman (Split 1886 – Zagreb 1971): Croatian art historian and conservationist. He studied art history in Vienna where he earned his Ph.D. in 1920 with the thesis *Die romanische Plastik in Spalato*. Since 1919 was assistant in the regional Conservation Office for Dalmatia, and from 1926 the main conservationist for Dalmatia based in Split. In Split he become closely associated with Don Frane Bulic with whom he authored *The Palace of The Emperor Diocletian*. Under pressure from the Italian fascist government he left Split in 1941 and moved to Zagreb where he became the director of the Conservation Institute until his retirement in 1950. He had studied Dalmatian

monuments from antiquity until baroque and had published dozens of major local art history studies. His most influential theoretical work is "On the **Influence** of **local context** in the art of Croatian regions" published in 1963.

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21. Karaman, *ibid.*, pp.6.

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