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Art as Social Practice in the Avant-Garde and Postmodernism

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The first **thesis** of the dissertation is that postmodernism is indefinable. This thesis contains methodological and substantive/conceptual implications for the whole structure of the dissertation. From a methodological point of view, perhaps the most important aspect is that I do not consider postmodernism to be either a well-defined era with clear characteristics or a concept for which a conclusive definition can be given. Furthermore, it is not possible to outline a grand, linear narrative that could clearly frame postmodernism, and then find an analytical grid that could show the transcendent truth of postmodernism above history.

What the dissertation, therefore, attempts to do is to show how postmodernism works in very different contexts. It also shows the changes in the use of the term in the second half of the 20th century.

Postmodernism is thus seen in the dissertation as an energy or tendency that can appear in very different ways in space and time, but cannot be fitted into any single grand narrative.

I use the concept of postmodernism primarily as a possible way of describing, narrating and interpreting the world, and due to this reason, linguistic aspects are at the centre of the analysis.

The perspective through which I examine the notion of postmodernism is social practice, or more specifically, how postmodernism relates to the question of power in the Foucauldian sense. By the latter, I mean the networks that define the possibilities of action and the frameworks of imaginability of the world within the scopes of certain discourses. Ultimately, the question will be: if one considers art (and literature) as a social practice in terms of the possibilities offered by postmodernism, what possible spaces of manoeuvre does this open up in certain fields of power and the critique of power.

In doing so, I seek to show that the meaning of postmodernism can only be determined in the practical operation of the concept, and that the discursive contexts themselves shape the meaning of postmodernism. Thus, in examining the meaning of postmodernism one can learn more about the discourses, rather than about postmodernism itself – as some kind of prediscursive concept.

The second **thesis** of the dissertation is that the unfolding of postmodernism in the 20th century stems from the experience of a crisis in the comprehensive and total intelligibility of the world (in the Hegelian sense), and even a crisis of 'reality' (as a philosophical and political concept) itself.

The first major unit of the dissertation seeks to outline certain Western contexts for the concept of postmodernity. The first chapter, with a social and political historical introduction, uses Guy Debord's work of 1967, *The Society of the Spectacle*, to provide a perspective for understanding the context in which the crisis of Western modernity, as an interpretation of reality, became clear by the 1960s, and why, at the same time, the revolutionary tradition of the historical avant-garde seemed to be unable to persist. Therefore the question is, under what complex set of conditions did it become clear that not only new answers but also new questions were needed.

From the perspective of the dissertation, the concept of modernity refers to the episteme in which, after the Enlightenment, it was still possible to claim authentically some kind of centre of the world (and within it the position of the subject). However, these centres are not given and guaranteed a priori, transcendently (and outside history), but are based on human rationality (and partly on a humanist notion of 'man').

It was also possible to authentically represent a revolutionary perspective, aiming at the revelation of the essence of the world and/or the fulfilment of an anticipated (but secular) truth, breaking with the linearity taken for granted and, in many cases, placing the present at the centre of the interpretation of the world.

At this point, one salient aspect of the Debordian social theory needed to be emphasized. Namely, that Debord saw that in the capitalist, consumerist, welfare societies of the 20th century, a little-mentioned aspect of Marxist theory is coming to the fore. The freedom created and framed by capitalism. What Debord sees very precisely in the notion of the spectacle is that in the capitalist society he analyses, it is not repression but increasing freedom that will be the decisive factor – at least in the West. Criticism, therefore, must focus more on the conditions of possibility and mediation of this growing freedom. To this extent, Debord also anticipates the Foucauldian thesis that 'nothing is outside', as in, he problematises the Hegelian-Lukácsian Marxist interpretation totality. Indeed, Debord's experience of his historical situation is that if spectacular capitalism seeks to frame and define all existing relations and interpretations of the world, then another totality is not the solution – not only the French political experience of the 1960s justified this, but also the experience of Soviet-style dictatorships, i.e. the rejection of any 'official' leftism.

Debord's critical position is thus based on the question of what room for manoeuvre is allowed within the system – since even the assumption of an Archimedean point is

increasingly difficult. Ultimately, Debord's claim is that all the tools for revolution are already in the tradition, they just need to be actualized.

On this Debord builds the concepts of *détournement* and *récupération*. While the former is the actualization of elements of tradition, whereby these elements are freed from their original context in a radically new context and achieve unexpected, subversive effects; *récupération* is the instrumentalized use of the elements of tradition, their appropriation as heteronomous means.

Debord makes this the basis of a revolutionary practice. This is significant in that, although it preserves certain avant-garde gestures, it breaks with the artistic-revolutionary practice of the avant-garde movements, which has been based on the principle of the search for the essence.

The basis for the expansion and exploitation of internal spaces of movement is the idea that no discourse of power that aspires to become total can ever reach a conclusive totality, i.e. the process of totalisation can never be complete. In other words, there will always be points of rupture that are present within the system, constitutively reinforcing the system, but which can be exploited simultaneously for the critique of power.

Our contention is that this dichotomy is both a key feature and a risk of postmodernism. It is, therefore, that it must manoeuvre at points of rupture that are both against power but also within it, and that power needs them precisely in order to be able to dynamically recreate itself.

The third **thesis** of the dissertation is that while the artistic and political revolutions of the avant-garde and modernity have been responded to the crisis of reality with a wave of 'purification' (Alain Badiou), postmodernism embraces this crisis, the disorientation of reality. The second chapter attempts to outline a possible history of this process, embracing the changing concept of postmodernism in Western European and American discourses.

The chapter is organised by two fundamental questions. On the one hand, how postmodernism gradually became an overarching worldview and epistemological framework. On the other hand, how the perception of postmodernism changed as the Western Marxist tradition began to interpret it increasingly as the cultural logic of so-called late capitalism (Fredric Jameson) rather than the logic of the countercultures of the 1960s.

Briefly, the answer is the same as the problem of the Debordian dichotomy of *détournement* and *récupération*. If postmodernism embraces the fluidity of reality and the intelligibility of reality, in opposition to any discourse or narrative that seeks to frame the world in any kind of total way, then so-called late or neoliberal capitalism, according to the Marxist tradition, instrumentalized precisely this process.

What postmodernism, therefore, is constantly breaking down from within is the comprehensive cognitive mapping of the world (Fredric Jameson), i.e. the centre/periphery, the great hero/enemy, the great story, the great purpose, absolute truth, stable identity and subject position, etc. Importantly, however, postmodernism does not claim that these do not exist or are not possible. Only that they can never be fully self-identical and complete, that they can never be closed. They must be constantly recreating themselves, and so it is always possible to exploit the internal breaking points that are essential to their existence – and this is precisely what various postmodern practices do.

In the light of all this, the history of the interpretation of Hungarian postmodernity in the 1980s also raises crucial questions about the concept of postmodernity in general. My research primarily examines postmodernism as a philosophical concept, as a worldview, and as a literary concept in the Hungarian context.

The fourth **thesis** of the dissertation is that the concept of postmodernism emerged in a historical-societal and artistic context in Hungary, where the basic experiences of Western modernity were not present. In the Hungarian interpretative milieu, postmodernism would thus have meant both an incorporation into or a return to the tradition of Western modernity in contrast to the grand narrative of dictatorship, and at the same time, a specific transgression of it.

With regard to the concept of postmodernism, the question immediately arises as to whether, if there is such a great difference between the functioning of the Western and Hungarian concepts of postmodernism, there is any sense in using the term in a uniform way. In my view, the task is not to create a uniform concept or definition of postmodernism – or the plausible refusal of this possibility – but to show a system of relations that can be connected between Western and Hungarian interpretations of postmodernism, taking into account the concrete possibilities of action.

Hungarian interpretations of postmodernism relied on a claim to autonomy that was clearly a political concept.

This is primarily to challenge (or to question) the still prevalent idea in the Hungarian literary interpretive tradition that Hungarian postmodernism was based on a depoliticised or apolitical worldview and interpretation of literature.

Indeed, if one looks more closely at the specific historical context and the literary (and theoretical) texts of the period, which have since become canonical, it is quite clear that an autopoietic framework of interpretation of art and literature with an exclusively aesthetic focus, independent of the mimetic referentiality of reality, was clearly established in opposition to the power narrative and discourse system of the dictatorship. The so-called independence or detachment from 'politics' was thus a genuinely clear political demand.

The central problem, however, is the functioning of the concepts of *politics* and *autonomy*. As Györgyi Horváth has pointed out, in Central and Eastern Europe, power and politics were external forces (in the sense of the concepts), separable from everyday life, against which autonomous spaces in the private sphere (art, civil society, small communities, private life, etc.) seemed in principle to be accessible.

In contrast, by the 1980s, Western critical theory of power had already largely recognised the functioning of power in these very (private) spheres. In other words, precisely in those areas where the individual could feel that they were independent of power.

The difference, nonetheless, here is not that one interpretation or the other is fundamentally wrong. It is simply that they were confronted with fundamentally different experiences and social traditions, which found themselves confronted with very different forms of power.

The wish to reconnect with the Western tradition, nevertheless, could be highly problematic for this very reason. Because the lack of historical experiences led to blind spots (and illusions) that often resulted in serious reflective deficits.

Despite all the differences, my contention is that there is one essential point in common between the Western and Hungarian conceptions of postmodernism. Namely, *the need to resist totalitarian discourses of power – and the practices based upon this need.*

What is important, however, is that the Hungarian interpretative milieu, precisely because of its lack of Western experience of modernity, also came forward with the demand for an autonomous, consensual and, in a sense, authoritative tradition. This was a confrontation with

the authority of political power. It is not a coincidence that one of the dangers of postmodernism, which has been raised by many, is that it is too relativising. If only insofar as it calls into question the formation and functioning of a consensus based upon a common tradition.

The problem, then, and this is what I try to point out in this dissertation, is that postmodernism in Hungary has emerged as a way of breaking down the all-conquering authoritarianism of dictatorial power, but which at the same time creates (or illuminates) a field of consensus (and a tradition of its foundations) that is rather the basis of a Western experience of modernity. The peculiarity of the Hungarian interpretation of postmodernism – and hence the blind spots – was thus that, as Béla Bacsó said in 1987, the Hungarian debates on postmodernism began in a context where modernization has not been carried through.

The aforementioned theoretical context is complemented in the dissertation by a chapter which examines Péter Esterházy's *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba (Introduction to Literature)*, primarily from the following perspectives.

1. The authority of tradition. Does the text itself designate the predecessors or the interpreters? To what extent can the reader move freely between the elements of tradition?
2. Citation-search and citation-handling. Here again, the freedom of the reader is a central question, but from a postmodern point of view, the reader who recognises nothing from citations is much more interesting than the reader who recognises everything. What interests me, then, is how Esterházy's claim that power is not to be feared by the writer, but by the reader, works in the case of a concrete literary text.
3. The ironic evasion of the language of power (and of language within the framework of power). Language can never be completely dominated, there will always be a separation that allows language to be out of touch with 'reality'. No power can completely subjugate language.
4. Eroticism/violence. The exercise of power itself has an erotic surplus, but at the same time the subjects subjected to power are also in a specific erotic position as they manoeuvre through the disappearing and emerging gaps in everyday life framed by the power matrix. The exploitation of these niches, constitutive of power, is one of the most exciting postmodern practices.

The third major unit of the thesis (the last two chapters) focuses on the *subject*. More specifically, the problem of how the (primarily philosophical) category of the 'revolutionary subject' has come into crisis and how it can be conceptualised at all within the postmodern framework. By revolution, the dissertation means a fundamental change in the framework of understanding the world and of the possible ways of acting in the world.

The two chapters analyse subject-positions and the problems arising from them. One of these is the concept of the revolutionary subject of the historical avant-garde in art (and thus, consubstantially, in politics), and more specifically the possible subject-positions of the avant-garde movements, especially the *vagabond* in Lajos Kassák.

There is, however, a clear tension between the revolutionary subject-positions of the avant-garde and modernity, if one focuses on the contrasts between different interpretations of revolution. The first chapter examines at length, via the specific Hungarian context, how Hungarian avant-garde conceptions of art and subject were in conflict with official socialist revolutionary ideas during the period of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919.

Our **thesis** here is that there is an inherent tension in modernity around the question of the revolutionary subject, which can be partly understood in terms of the conflict between autonomy and heteronomy.

The link between the cases examined in the two chapters is essentially organized by an attempt to show how the problem of revolution, emancipation or critique of power, which can claim less and less a subject-position on stable grounds, claiming for itself some kind of autonomy, in clear and explicit opposition to some oppressive order, is being fulfilled in postmodernity.

Indeed, when comparing the avant-garde and the socialist/communist revolutionary movements of the left, the fundamental question (and dilemma) arises as to what extent the so-called 'whole life for the cause' revolutionary logic and way of life harbours the risk of the very heteronomy that it is supposed to fight against.

The avant-garde, however, raises this problem even more sharply in relation to art, because it must constantly manoeuvre within a dilemma. Namely that if it is completely subordinated to a revolutionary logic organised along non-artistic imperatives, it can cease to be art; if it subordinates political and social revolution to the internal logic of art, it can cease to have a directly political aspect.

The **thesis** here is that the revolutionary position of both the outsider resulting from the position of the vagabond and the 'whole life for the cause' revolutionary imperative is in crisis by the middle of the 20th century. So is the imperative of modernity, based on its favoured position of the present, to decide, because the battle (in every sense) is now being decided!

This crisis is not the result of postmodernity, but was already present in modernity. Nonetheless, to crystallise this problem, it was necessary to abandon the imperative of a radical choice between autonomy and heteronomy, between exclusion (and being 'outside') and repression.

The final chapter of the dissertation attempts to ask whether there can be a subject-position or practice of subjectivation that can be able to fulfil postmodern energies and tendencies.

In doing so, eventually, the last **thesis** of the dissertation is that there is a postmodern subject-position that essentially avoids becoming the centre of a new totalitarian discourse of truth. And this is queer.

In the sense of the queer discourse of the 1980s/90s, queerness represents a set of lifestyles and social practices that cannot be subordinated to a set of definitive identity categories. To this extent, it was undoubtedly in opposition to the cisheteronormativity of the time, however (1) its aim was not acceptance (tolerance) by discourses of power, (2) it was not a mere counter-discourse that simply confronted power, and (3) it did not promise a position to escape from power and to look at power from the outside. The very word queer itself reflected the way queerness was defined by power. But queer is not an embrace of some kind of outcasthood, but an exploitation of the gaps in the constitutive, internal practices of discourses of power (and all identities) – as all discourses and identities are constantly in need of recreating themselves via performative acts, and in doing so they need points of resistance that allow them to affirm themselves *as* themselves.

However, since this is a never-ending process, queer appears precisely where these reconstitutions are needed, as in, it exploits the very gaps where all discourses of truth and all identities are fractured.

Queerness is therefore a process of identification (a multiplicity of lifestyles and a space of solidarity between them) that can never be an identity. In other words, queer 'identity' is subtractive (Alain Badiou) in that when one says of oneself, "I am queer", one automatically

calls into question the entire discursive construction of the subject (and the conditions of possibility of identity, and even of the statement itself), creating a disruption in the discourse that allowed the statement to be made.

Publications related to the dissertation:

- Bartha Ádám: *Posztmodern térképek – ideológia és ideológiakritika között*, In: *Közép-Európa a komparatistikában*, ed. Horváth Csaba et al., Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem-L'Harmattan Kiadó, Bp., 2021. 135-143.
- Bartha Ádám: *Nevetés a sötétből: Joker és a kozmikus idegenség*, *Helikon*, 2020/2, 240-256.
- Bartha Ádám, Keresztury Dorka: *Forradalom és tradíció Debord-nál*. *aszem.info*, 2020.04.15., <https://aszem.info/2020/04/forradalom-es-tradicio-debord-nal/>
- Bartha Ádám: *A Másik domesztikálása*, *Prae.hu*, 2019.12.01., <https://www.prae.hu/article/11312-huszonegyedik-12/>
- Bartha Ádám: *A posztmodern mint menedék (Thomas Pynchon: Kísérleti fázis)*, *Alföld*, 2018/2, 53-66.