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The Hungarian avant-garde and the reception of Futurism in Hungary

Abstract

My paper aims to give an account of the Hungarian avant-garde in the early 20th century, born as a result of the European crisis of the late 19th century.

Europe entered the 20th century characterized by deep changes in several fields: social, economic, political, cultural, artistic, literary, etc. The phenomenon of industrialization caused the emergence of the working class, the formation of mass parties and the establishment of democratic instances, such as universal suffrage, and revealed the inadequacy of the elitist model of representation, typical of 19th century liberalism.

The programmes of the nationalist movements that gained strength in the late 19th century were inspired by conflict and violence; sense was rejected in favor of sensibility and tradition. The identification between science, truth and progress, key point of the model of 19th century positivism, was not valid anymore. New discoveries, non-Euclidean geographic spaces, Einstein's theory of relativity, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle led to a necessary re-examination of general theories accepted for centuries and considered universal.

The critic of the 19th century society strengthened and new interpretive perspectives came up thanks to Nietzsche's philosophical concept of *Übermensch* (overman), Bergson's *élan vital* (vital impetus), *The interpretation of dreams* by Freud, the theories on revolutionary syndicalism and Georges Sorel's exaltation of the role of action.

The crisis of values and certainties coincided, at the turn of the 20th century, with real "revolutions" in literature and figurative arts, and it marked the beginning of the era of the avant-garde movements.

Later criticism called "historical" the avant-garde arose and spread in the early 19th century, e.g. Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, etc., to distinguish them from "neo-avant-garde" that asserted itself after World War II.

The avant-garde, as we understand it today, corresponds to the research of those artistic groups that offer a radical innovation as opposed to an artistic tradition considered outdated or no longer suitable for contemporary civilization and society. “Avant-garde” defines an original and progressive art that announces the fight against conservatism and prosperity of mediocrity for the sake of a vision of the future. Modern art – as claimed the Italian art historian Mario De Micheli – wasn’t born as an evolution of 19th century art, but it came from a break from the 19th century values.

In Hungary, modernism conceived as alternative – according to the Hungarian art historian Lajos Németh – played an important role in the orientation of social sensitivity. The artist actively committed, as to a political cause, reacted to the critical situation of the early 20th century society by raising awareness among other intellectuals and making them ready for the change.

Each socio-historical transformation, according to Németh, involves a choice and art can offer an alternative with its own language and through its special means, in other words it can give a new scale of values and a new sensitivity.

At the beginning of the 20th century modern art offered its own alternative: the creation of innovative forms and the independence of visual language, as the activities of the first Hungarian avant-garde evidenced. Its theoretician, the Hungarian poet, novelist, painter, essayist and editor Lajos Kassák named the new movement “Activism” and the members of his circle “Activists”. Kassák was initially influenced by the Italian Futurists, especially by F.T. Marinetti. In the essay “*Il futurismo*” di Lajos Kassák (“Futurism” by Lajos Kassák) – being printed on n. 12/2013 of the *Rivista di Studi Ungheresi* (Hungarian Studies Journal) – I present and translate the paper entitled *Futurism* written by L. Kassák and published between 1956 and 1957 in *Az izmusok története* (The history of isms). *Futurism* represents the first real analysis of Italian Futurism done by a great character of the Hungarian avant-garde. According to the innovation attempted by the Italian Futurists, the Activists created a visual language facing a renewed sensitivity and rejecting the contemporary social system.

Being part of the avant-garde did not only mean the adoption of a new style, but, in particular, the establishment of a different life model and vision of the world, aiming to retrieve the values and certainties that were undergoing a crisis in the age of Progress.