High and Low

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Department of Art History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

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Futurism in East and Central Europe

Session 7
(double session)
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chair: Günter Berghaus
(University of Bristol)

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Session 7
Futurism in East and Central Europe

Chair: **Günter Berghaus**
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In the past 20 years, there has been an amazing upsurge of interest in Futurism in most countries formerly situated east of the Iron Curtain. Although Russian Futurism was always well-known, the multifaceted extensions of Futurism in the other Eastern countries were not much reported on in Italy and became nearly forgotten after 1945. However, since 1989 a wealth of material has been rediscovered, both in the literary and artistic field. Also in the domains of music, theatre, architecture and applied arts many new names are being brought to the surface, year after year.

The Futurist interest in merging the two spheres of art and life meant that Futurist literature obtained a great deal of inspiration from the rapidly changing social environment. In the theatre, cooperation with well-known actors from the variety and music-hall circuit led to the invention of new dramatic and performative genres of a distinctly popular mould. Conversely, various aspects of the "High Arts" were translated into the everyday sphere, and the second phase of Futurism largely stood under the sign of architecture, urbanism, interior design, fashion design, graphic design etc.

In this session, seven experts will present some of their recent discoveries of Eastern and Central European artists belonging to the wider ambit of the Futurist movement and combine this with a discussion of aspects of their śuvre that relate to the overall theme of the conference, "High and Low".

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Zenitism / Futurism: Similarities and Differences

Although rooted in different epochs, cultures, historical and political conditions, the paths of Futurism and Zenitism crossed on several levels. They had much in common, yet also represented different aesthetic and political positions. Zenitism almost completely identified with its founder and ideologist, Ljubomir Micić (1895-1971) and his international revue for new art, *Zenit* (Zagreb-Belgrade, 1921-1926). It was exposed to multiple influences and doctrines, ranging from Expressionism and Dadaism to Futurism and Surrealism, Constructivism and Socialist Realism. In its beginnings, Zenitism was close to the second generation of Italian Futurists and their machine cult, ideas of dynamic movement and belief in progress were evident in Zenitist manifestoes, poems, theatre pieces and in the typographic design of the review *Zenit*.

Zenitism was very receptive to industrial and mechanical innovations, such as railways, machines, photographic cameras, and consequently experimented with photography, film, industrial design etc. Marinetti's *parole in libertà* and dramatic *sintesi* contributed to the programmatic renewal of poetic language. The influence of these innovations, combined with Cubist elements of a Realist nature, became complemented by short synthetic dramas and prose texts by Zenitist authors such as Albin Čebular, Evgenije Dundek and Ljubomir Micić.

Micić quickly overcame national boundaries and, like the Italian Futurists, spread his messages internationally, as far as the Americas and even Japan. In his mature phase (after 1922), the autonomous character of Zenitism became established, in particular by means of Balkanisms and the metaphorical figure of the "barbarian genius". The idea behind this was a mixture of the "Futurist reconstruction of the universe" and the Zenitist project of "Barbarianism". Both ideologies were founded on a critique of a decadent, conservative and agonizing Europe. Polemics about the origins of Zenitism and its Futurist connections continued until the late 1930s. Marinetti considered Zenitism to be "Yugoslav literary barbarian anti-European Futurism" and placed it somewhere between Purism and Surrealism, – something that Micić never accepted. Also politically, he never agreed with the political choices of Futurism.

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"A spectre is hunting Europe – the spectre of Futurism": The Ukrainian Pan-Futurists of the 1920s and Their Artistic Ambitions

A paraphrase from Karl Marx' *Communist Manifesto* was the motto of the first (and the only one) issue of *A Semaphore for the Future*, a revue of the Ukrainian Pan-Futurists (1922). Nonetheless, this and many other publications of the Ukrainian modernists of the early post-revolutionary time represent a controversial interaction with the Italian Futurist movement in the Eastern outskirts of Europe.

The movement of Pan-Futurism, founded by a small group of Ukrainian writers, saw itself as the only legitimate successor of Italian Futurism, which in their eyes was already decadent and passé. Leftist and radical, they perceived Pan-Futurism, like Communism, as "the end of all the Isms". The multiple activities of the Ukrainian Pan-Futurists ranged from crude manifestos and public disputes to sophisticated theoretical essays, visual poetry and "poesofilm". In their publications, the Ukrainians responded to Futurist events in Western and Central Europe and tried to create links between Futurism and Dada.

My paper will discuss the following issues:

- Which was the position of the Ukrainian Futurists in the network between Paris, Berlin, and Moscow?
- How did their "destructive poetics" fit into the constructive programme of the Socialist state?
- What was different in their concept and behaviour in comparison to their Russian colleagues?
- How did the Ukrainian Modernists cope with the dilemma of high and low, the Ukrainian tradition of folk art and the cosmopolitan universalism?

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H2SO4: The Futurist Experience in Georgia

In 1923, a number of young Georgian poets established a short-lived Futurist group, H2SO4, which can be analyzed from different angles.

Facts: More than ten young people were engaged in the group which named itself after a sulphuric acid, thus announcing that they intended to destroy old-fashioned art just like that chemical; they published a couple of literary journals and newspapers, such as *H2SO4, Literatura da Skhva, Memartskheneoba, Drouli*; they produced poetry and literary essays, and one of them produced graphic and stage designs; avant-garde aestheticism was in important ingredient in their works.

Cultural influence: Aesthetically, the group was influenced by works and theoretical principles declared by Italian and Russian Futurists, as well as other European and Russian avant-garde movements.

Local cultural preconditions: H2SO4 was preceded by Georgian Symbolism, which started around 1915/16 and, like in France and Russia, served as a cultural background to Futurist art. Georgian Symbolists were the first to introduce Modernist aesthetics and philosophy to Georgia and to adopt avant-garde principles, such as aggressive opposition to Realistic literature. Although some Russian poets (Aleksey Kruchenykh, the group 41°), escaped to Georgia to avoid the turmoil of revolution and civil war, a truly Futurist experience only appeared a few years later. The short period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918 - 1921, followed by Russian annexation and integration into the Soviet Union), possessed a free, open and vigorous cultural atmosphere that encouraged development towards a Modernist / avant-garde culture.

Postcolonial/colonial/totalitarian realities: Georgia became a Russian colony in 1801; the surge of interest in European Modernist culture in the late 1910s can be seen to represent an anti-colonial tendency. The repeated colonization of the country and the totalitarian policy of the Soviet State, developed and implemented from the mid-1920s onwards, affected the cultural situation all over the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia. Modernist culture was announced as being hostile to Soviet interests, and avant-garde authors, including all H2SO4 members, were forced to renounce their cultural identity. All Modernist / avant-garde activities were suspended.

High & low in the culture of Democratic / Soviet Georgia: In Western cultures, Modernism and avant-garde art, despite its elite nature, contributed to a creation of a liberal cultural/societal atmosphere. As a result of Soviet cultural/ideological pressure, this cultural experience of democratic Georgia was almost completely erased from cultural memory and did not leave any traces in the cultural development of Soviet Georgia. Realism/ Socialist Realism became the dominant artistic styles.

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Margit Gáspár, a Hungarian Writer and Marinetti

Margit Gáspár (1905-1994) met Marinetti for the first time on the occasion of Marinetti's visit to Budapest in 1931. She was then a young and attractive journalist who interviewed the famous personality. Later on, she became a dramatist, writer and translator. In 1985, she published her memoirs, *Láthatatlan királyság* (Invisibile Reign), in which she claims that between 1931 and 1935 she had an amorous affair with Marinetti. This book offers interesting insights into Marinetti's character and opinions and into his relationship to other personalities of the day. Gáspár later became a Communist and no longer shared Marinetti's political views, nor was she particularly attracted to Futurism. Nevertheless, she had a rather matter-of-fact approach to her past and wanted to make the reader understand her passion for Marinetti – a passion described also with some self-irony. We can consider Gáspár Gáspár, who was well-informed about Futurism – something rare for her age – to having been an important go-between between Hungarian intellectuals and Marinetti. The paper presents key elements of Gáspár's memories and analizes newspaper articles and other documents related to Marinetti's visits to Hungary.

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Diulgheroff's Hybrid Artistic Identity Within the Context of Secondo Futurismo

Artists with multiple national identities often face difficulties in finding recognition in conventional historical narratives. Even though their works may be related to artistic trends in the one or the other milieu, they nevertheless put established paradigms to the test and often end up being relegated to the margins.

With Nicolay Diulgheroff, as well as with other artists whose names are outside the well-known and widely-spoken European languages, the difficulties begin with the name itself. Nicola or Nicolay? Dyulgerov, Diulgheroff, Djulgheroff or even Dulgeroff? His career as an architect and designer began with his participation in exhibitions of Futurist and Rationalistic architecture in Italy (1928, 1931, 1932), his design of the Casa Mazzotti in Albisola (1934) and the Santopalato restaurant in Turin (1931). Diulgheroff designed villas, restaurants, residential and industrial buildings. He participated in different fairs with interior design solutions and advertisements. In the 1930s, he realized a new type of street hoarding on aluminium panels and published several critical texts in *Stile futurista* and *Città nuova*.

Diulgheroff's hybrid artistic identity relates not only to his cultural and educational background, but also to his choice of his means of expression. Diulgheroff responded with enthusiasm to the rapid technological advances by placing personal accents in his manner of combining rigid architectonic forms with a dynamic composition of images. Diulgheroff shared with the Futurists a common enthusiasm for the art of everyday environments, modern cities, industrial fairs and exhibitions. At the same time, he created images that went beyond mere representation. His abstract paintings and collages affected his interior, environmental and architectural designs, and put the notion of "reality" under discussion.

In the 1920s, Diulgheroff had an aura of an avant-garde artist in Bulgaria. Although he was educated in prestigious art institutions in Europe, his artistic activities during the 1930s – mainly design and advertising – were no longer discussed in Bulgarian art criticism, with a few exceptions. As from the end of the 1920s, Italy as well as Marinetti's Futurist movement bore the imprint of Fascism, it became impossible to write and publish about Diulgheroff during the Communism period. In Turin today, the name of Nicolay Diulgheroff is well-known and art experts show due respect to his creations, yet, to most people they are only known from reproductions in catalogues, encyclopaedias and books, and not from displays in public museums. It is obvious that in Italy, too, Diulgheroff has remained a foreigner due to his dual national heritage.

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Anton Podbevšek, Italian Futurism and the Slovenian Interwar Avant-garde

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Slovenian cultural field was highly attentive to new artistic movements in Italy. The first Futurist manifesto was immediately reported and commented upon, and many articles in Slovenian cultural journals and literary magazines kept informing their readers on Futurism

timely, exhaustively and accurately. Consequently, many writers established personal contacts with Italian Futurists.

In 1913, Ivan Gruden published an extensive essay, "L'Italia futurista", that included an informed treatment of the *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista*. It encouraged Anton Podbevšek (1898-1981), a very young poet from the provincial town of Novo mesto, to write his *Yellow Letter*, and to structure it according to the "rules" of Marinetti's manifesto. Together with a presumptuous accompanying letter, the cycle was later considered to be a "manifesto of the Slovenian historical avant-garde", but it was only published in the 1970s. After World War I, Podbevšek sought to revolutionize Slovenian poetry and to promote himself as a leader of the new movement. Alongside other important influences, such as Expressionist poetry, Nietzsche and Walt Whitman, Futurism left considerable traces in his śuvre, especially his long lyrical prose "hymns" – although his attitude towards the Italian movement became rather ambivalent.

In his radical "avant-garde years" (1920-1922), Podbevšek performed in several provocative soirées and became a kind of an urban attraction in Ljubljana. However, he ceased to write poetry and turned towards ultra-leftist political positions. For a short while, he managed to lead a small artistic group, and his ground-breaking poetic innovations were the source of inspiration to several young writers. But his followers soon turned against him, accusing him of authoritarianism and haughtiness. After 1927, Podbevšek ceased to produce either new poetry or a consistent theoretical program and finally retreated from the cultural field altogether.

After the World War II, Podbevšek was rediscovered as a predecessor of the Slovenian neo-avant-gardes and his role as an avant-garde poet and leader was investigated exhaustively in the national context. To a certain degree, this delayed recognition can be ascribed to the fact that Podbevšek and his group – unlike Ljubomir Micić and the *Zenit* circle that Podbevšek had brief contacts with in the early 1920s – never managed to establish an international network, so vital for the European avant-gardism, and that even later the avant-garde in Slovenia remained an autarkic phenomenon. A wide-spread ignorance of the semi-peripheral cultural fields of South-Eastern Europe is another reason of why many cultural histories omit Podbevšek and other interesting Slovenian modernist and avant-garde authors.

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Aesthetic affinities and political divergences between Italian and Romanian Futurism

In the period 1909-1930, Romanian avant-garde literature was heavily influenced by Italian Futurism and responded to the Italian movement in a complex process of permeation and critical reflection. My paper will present the main phases, modalities, themes and products of Romanian avant-garde literature and assess to what degree it was influenced by the aesthetic programme of Italian Futurism. I shall discuss a number of Futurist texts that appeared in the Romanian national press (manifestos, literary writings, paintings, etc.) and reveal how Romanian artists responded to them. A particular emphasis will be laid on the activities of two figures who later became major representatives of the Dada movement, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco.

The second part of my paper will discuss the opposite political choices made by the Futurists and the Romanian avant-garde in the 1920s. Although the latter derived important stimuli from the "constructivist" sector of the Futurist movement, they nevertheless acted as Left-wing antifascists, with some being members of the Communist Party. The avant-garde review *Unu*, published in Bucharest, entered into an aesthetic and political exchange with the French Surrealists and supported Breton's Communist path. I shall present the clandestine and subversive activities of the most important members of *Unu's* editorial staff, Sasa Pana, Stephan Roll and Victor Brauner, and discuss Futurist influences on Roll's early poems and manifestos, in the context of Marinetti's visit to Bucharest in 1930.