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Zenit Rising

Return to a Balkan Avant-Garde

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A Critical Revival

The last five years have seen an explosion of interest in what, by all respects, should be a small and forgotten avant-garde publication. The experimental magazine *Zenit* (1921–26) was the output of a tiny core group of Serbs working initially in Zagreb in the early 1920s, and in the country then known as the Kingdom—not yet of Yugoslavia—but of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Such circumstances hardly predicted a revival nearly a century later.

Yet one glance at a recent bibliography reveals a veritable flood of articles, books, monographs, exhibits, and conference presentations on the subject.¹ In the past several years, Belgrade and Zagreb have released rival catalogs of the complete issues of *Zenit*, alongside an impressive and expensive complete facsimile reprint of the magazines for collectors. Recently, the National Library of Serbia has made the complete set available online.² The Ubu Gallery in New York City faithfully collects the original issues, as well as an archive of related ephemera: advertisements, flyers, requests for payment from subscribers, and invitations to *Zenit*-related events. Whence the resurgent interest?

The titles alone of these recent articles speak volumes: “Croatia Has an Avant-Garde!”³ claims one headline. Another proclaims “The Vitality of Avant-Garde Art,”⁴ and yet another more enigmatically celebrates “8 ½ Decades Since the Foundation of *Zenit* and Zenitism.”⁵ Meanwhile, a Belgrade publication sums up the work produced in and around *Zenit* as

the “Zagreb intermezzo of the Serbian avant-garde.” Given the context of post-Yugoslav spaces and regional rivalries, there is nothing unusual in this interweaving of national claims. However, the very interest in a marginal, nationally slippery avant-garde publication such as *Zenit* signals something of a sea change. The internationally known writer Dubravka Ugrešić, a scholar of *Zenit* before disintegration, some years ago thought there would be little chance of reviving interest in the journal in Zagreb.⁶ It is also fair to say that fifteen years ago, there would have been little chance of a *Zenit*-related gallery show, with no mention of any wars except, perhaps, World War I, in a New York gallery. The landscape has shifted, and even the leading center of cultural capital is invested in emerging, rediscovered, plural modernisms.

I propose to examine this marked and sudden return of interest in a slim journal originally conceived of as a monthly provocation. Who needs a marginal avant-garde? Who needs a *tradition* of the avant-garde, even more curiously; and why might these post-Yugoslav spaces, in the current critical parlance, be so interested in reviving this one?

The First Balkan Avant-Garde

The *Zenit* journals were collections of essays, poems, and manifestos in two alphabets and a handful of languages, including Esperanto; avant-garde art objects; revolutionary events; and a collective experiment headed by Liubomir Micić, the group’s André Breton. The collective grew still smaller with each quarrel: by the end, one suspects that only Micić’s brother, Branko Ve (or Virgil) Poljanski, and wife, Anuška (pseudonym Nina-Naj), could stand him. But for almost six years, the *Zenitisti* glued together word and image on cheap press, declared themselves the local avant-garde, and sought to make their double marginality an integral part of the manifesto.

In 1921, the new kingdom was stretching fledgling wings toward the West, but these Zagreb troublemakers looked elsewhere for inspiration. “I am the brother of Raskolnikov!” claims the title of one manifesto. The motto provokes: “Balkanize the world!” “We aren’t Gnostics to ponder how the sky is composed of spirit. We are heretics who hate your God. . . . We Zenitists are the first who in art listen to the commandment of our wild blood. (You call us barbarians!) We are the first to discover that there is a land of the Barbaro-genius—the Balkans!”⁷

Yugoslavia was born out of Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian wreckage, and from the nightmare of World War I. As Miško Šuvaković reminds us, “All the transcendent political models of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were part of the Yugoslav rise and fall,” including, as he puts it, “bourgeois national capitalism and liberal capitalist fascism, nationalism and revolutionary communism, Stalinism, real socialism, self-governing socialism, post-socialist patriotism, and transitional post-socialism.”⁸ That alone should make the region worthy of study and critical attention: the rise and fall of Yugoslavia encapsulates much of the twentieth century’s bloodshed, ideological struggle, and idealism.

However, the interwar avant-garde, and especially the Zagreb circle centered on Micić in the early 1920s, met the recent wreckage with perhaps the region’s most ambitious artistic response. I limit my attention here to Micić and *Zenit*, and to 1921–25, the first five years of the journal’s life. These early Zagreb years catch *Zenit* at its most ambitiously internationalist and deliberately radical. One of *Zenit*’s first manifestos opens as follows:

Man—that is our first word. From the solitude of stiff walls and cursed streets, from the dark depths of the subconscious and unearthly nights, we emerge before you like apostles, like prophets, to prophesize: Man-Art . . . We are entering today into a New Decade and we have to get past the borders of Yugoslavia. In the last decade we were soldiers of war and murder for “the freedom of the people” outside of those borders, and from today on we want to be soldiers of humanity. Of Culture, Love, and Brotherhood. We are entering as the suffering and the converted. We are entering crippled and wounded as a people, but in us lies the strength of those who suffered, who were humiliated, who were stoned on the pillory-stocks of Europe. Let our entrance into the third decade of the twentieth century be a fight for humanity, through Art.⁹

Arguably, this avant-garde was doomed before it began. In interwar capitalism, such provocations represented the excluded far left; after World War II and Yugoslavia’s metamorphosis into a socialist state, they would be treated as “extreme expressions of Western bourgeois or civilian decadence, cosmopolitanism, and political subversion.”¹⁰

Yet in 1921, Micić tried almost single-handedly to launch a movement and to introduce *Balkan avant-garde* as a serious term. It was a moment in European culture defined by such projects, but one that Micić and his colleagues, in their newly pieced-together country, took as entirely theirs. The *Zenit* group worked from their position on the margin of other avant-gardes, and took advantage of their relative cultural “youth”: from scraps

of Nietzsche, Russian modernism in all its forms, expressionism, futurism, dadaism, and constructivism, the Zenitists built the Balkan barbarogenius.

The Collective Event

As an art object and as a collective project, *Zenit* challenged multiple preconceptions about artistic production. Conflicts between avant-gardists and Yugoslav modernists centered on the question of collectivity: while the avant-gardists aspired to and proclaimed the triumph of collective art in manifestos, modernist poetry remained “rooted in individual, highly aestheticized artistic (poetic) practice.”¹¹

Šuvaković points out that, unlike the paradigmatic Russian and German avant-gardes, to which the marginal European movements looked for inspiration, “the utopian ideas of the entire work (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) in Yugoslav avant-gardes were embodied only in manifesto platforms and utopian or projected trends.” He contrasts an art that consisted mostly of manifestos to grand collective accomplishments in “architecture (the Bauhaus building), theater (Oskar Schlemmer’s mathematical dance), monumental sculpture (Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*), and public mass performance and theatrical experiment (the art of *LEF*).”¹² However, the utopian exclamations of *Zenit* were their own legitimate events.

Journals were *the* medium for the Yugoslav avant-garde: “The history of the Yugoslav avant-garde from 1921 to 1932 [is] defined by the magazines. . . . These magazines were not only literary works or literary mediators (communicators) with a specific art typography, but intertextual and inter pictorial experimental creations forming an avant-garde model of textual visual expression.”¹³

Sonja Briski Uzelac adds that magazines did more than “transmit” literary works or even add a decorative or illustrative visual component: they “assumed the function of an elementary medium, a fundamental space, and material avant-garde invasion of the institution of art.”¹⁴ An added and not to be underestimated benefit was social: these publications provided a “communication system of art, primarily among artists but more broadly among the cultural centers. . . . These ties created the basis for an entire artistic archipelago.”¹⁵ For readers and participants alike, serial publications served as a kind of social network.

Today and for similar reasons, experimental art magazines, often wildly reinvented and in electronic form, have never seemed more rel-

evant. The imperfection and vitality of serial publication, the compromise of art pieced together by group effort, suggests an aesthetic increasingly our own.¹⁶

The Politics of Word and Image

One wants to read and frame a *Zenit* simultaneously, and ends up using the journal to wrap fish. The breakdown of borders between word and image has been so successful in the twentieth century that by now it is ubiquitous and unavoidable in commercial design; but to better grasp the political significance of the visual-textual experimentation in the early avant-garde, we need only turn to Walter Benjamin's seminal writings on media and technological reproducibility.

In "The Author as Producer," originally given as an address at the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism in 1934, Benjamin writes with fascination about the novel potential of the Soviet printing press. Innovative use of technology seemed to abolish "the conventional distinction between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and popularizer . . . even the distinction between author and reader."¹⁷

Benjamin called for technical progress to lead the way to political progress, to

overcom[e] another of the barriers, transcend another of the antitheses, that fetter the production of intellectuals—in this case, the barrier between writing and image. What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value. But we will make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography. Here, too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress. In other words, only by transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production—a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order—can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers imposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide.¹⁸

What is striking about *Zenit* as a particular example of the avant-garde assault on barriers is that it presents such a conscious reach for a new art form. The paradoxically local and international issues, with their increasing breakdown between visual and semantic uses of text, as well as between the roles of poet, organizer, and revolutionary, show the formal

manifestations of a progressive art in the very process of *becoming*. Thirteen years before Benjamin's essay, Micić and his colleagues were struggling toward artistic and theoretical formulations of just such a stand, simultaneously evolving theory and praxes. One of the privileges of the double outsider, located on the margins of cultural production as an avant-garde artist and geopolitically on the margins of other avant-gardes, is an acute and prescient self-consciousness.

The pages and images of *Zenit* offer word-image confections, differing from mere collage in that they include the dimension of time. The experience of leafing through pages, or potentially through issues of the serial publication, adds a phenomenological and experiential element for the reader-viewer. To push a bit further, the experiment begins to resemble montage done on the cheap, a textual version of early avant-garde cinema.

The Zenitists worshiped American films. Micić once gave the following as a formula: "U.S.A. = Poe + Whitman + Chaplin"; the last was to him the most important ingredient. *Zenit* looked to popular forms and used the smallest-scale means of production to twist and radicalize aesthetic principles stolen from Hollywood, and from signs and advertisements. They learned to flatten the surface from soup advertisements as well as from Kandinsky, and cribbed geometry from road signs and Malevich. The productive tension shows in the journals, which devoured the popular culture of mass capitalism and regurgitated leftist avant-gardes—as in the later phenomena of French New Wave cinema. (With a beautiful circularity, late 1970s and early 1980s "Yugoslav New Wave" films nod to this early local print avant-garde.)

Throughout, the *Zenit* experiment followed a single dominant, a "zenith" in the projection of a new civilization of image and sign.¹⁹ The aspiration upward and as a progressive struggle signals an attempted Lamarckian evolution in art. We can compare this struggle with Benjamin's words in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

The history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard—that is to say, in a new art form. The excesses and crudities of art which thus result, particularly in periods of so-called decadence, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies. In recent years, Dadaism has amused itself with such barbarisms. Only now is its impulse recognizable: *Dadaism attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film.*²⁰

Film infected the entirety of the international avant-garde, as the Zenitists were openly aware. Micić writes that one must “learn from film the speed of changing place and space, but this film miracle should stand on the firm basis of a single unique idea.”²¹ Actual film projects were rare and remained unfinished even in later years, as Nevena Daković has discussed in her work on Yugoslav film theory: “The first avant-garde generated a number of film forms never intended to be made into actual films, but devoted to developing *the technique of the imagined work*. . . . [Instead it generated] written film designed to induce highly subjective imagined film, like that destined to be projected onto the personal screen in the viewer’s head.”²² Looked at in such a context, the highly visual *Zenit* journals begin to resemble illustrated film scripts, with included stage directions and implicit sound effects: each “viewer” might come away with a slightly different version of the shared and implied “film.”

Boško Tokin, one of the core founders of *Zenit*, was in reality a frustrated filmmaker who went on to become a pioneer of Yugoslav film theory and criticism. Such leanings were unsurprising: in the 1920s cinematography was a “fetish apparatus,” and film was considered by many to be “the only art linked to a modern technique able to reflect the essence of an urban environment and the rhythm of a technological age.”²³ Tying his interests together, Tokin argued for the “linguistic nature” of film in his articles, and concluded that “film is a type of ‘new Esperanto’ . . . since any idea written in light and movement is universally understood.”²⁴ The Zenitists as a group were aiming at nothing less than a new and universal language. They lacked the resources to make movies, and so they made magazines.

Balkanizing Europe

Micić’s people gorged on Cézanne and expressionism; drank in the same toxins as Siegfried Kracauer and the early Frankfurt school; dissected dada; would soon out-séance surrealism; and conducted epistolary romances with both Muscovite *and* Parisian Russians—alternately cursing and currying favor with such white émigrés as Zinaida Gippius and Dmitry Merezhkovsky. Šuvaković calls these “contradictory, eclectic, and shocking ideological characteristics,” roughly definable as “an anarchist approach using a variety of strategies for provocation within the greater ideologies of pan-Slavism, nationalism, Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, Bolshevik revolutionary rhetoric, Trotskyism,”²⁵ and so forth.

To overemphasize the anarchy, however, is to downplay the experiment's potential. Rather than view *Zenit* as a grab bag of radical strategies merging into pan-Slavism, we can read it as an ideology and artistic form struggling to emerge out of the available materials. If the "Balkan-ness" of the barbarogenius was so prominently stressed (see for example the Evgenije Dudek poem in *Zenit* issue 13: "Ja sam zenitista da strašan Balkanac [I am a Zenitist, a frightening Balkanite]"), it was primarily to provide a counterstance, a dialectical opposition to everything for which "mainstream" Europe stood. From the start, this wild man was emphatically *Balkan*, not Serbian, Croatian, or Yugoslav—despite the utter lack of other Balkan participants in the project.

The movement, or rather its troubled leader, did eventually and notoriously slide into nationalism. Micić moved his headquarters to Belgrade in the mid-1920s, and then fled to Paris, only to return in 1936 to publish a single issue of "an obscure, rightist, nationalist magazine," *Serbianism*. "He spent the rest of his life in complete anonymity," as Darko Šimičić grimly summarizes.²⁶ Arguably, this tendency toward nationalism was present from the beginning—every radical impulse contains the germs of its opposite bent. But at the start, the mission of the Balkan barbarogenius was, as *Zenit* claimed, not to "retain" cultural supremacy behind one's own borders, but to Balkanize Europe. Aleš Erjavec writes: "*Zenit* promoted the idea of an 'eastern-metacosmic type of superman,' who would have 'a superior relation to Mme Europe' and its worn-out values. . . . Micić's ideas are reminiscent not only of Nietzsche but of the 'national' wing of Russian futurism [Khlebnikov, etc.] which promulgated (counter to the cosmopolitan futurism of Mayakovsky's circle) a negation of culture, an animality, troglodytism, and the Slavic tradition at the expense of the Italo-German one." But Erjavec too notices that any clear antinomy is in fact undermined by the conflation just sketched out: by blending the ideas of German expressionism with those of Russian futurism, Micić was developing a "link between the two parts of the continent: *Zenit* was to be the voice of Europe's East speaking to Europe's West."²⁷ For hardly the first or last time, the very language of its critique comes from the Western tradition.

Šimičić in turn points out that, despite being "strongly under the influence of the European avant-garde, Micić insisted on the autochthonous Balkan 'barbarogenius' opposing Europe."²⁸ The seeming contradiction does not quite undermine the *Zenit* stance: Micić aimed to appropriate

the best other cultures had to offer, from a position on the margins that, in his hands, suddenly seemed privileged. How? Why? “Micić believed that the time had come for the Balkan region to be more than just Europe’s cultural colony, ‘in which the importation of cultural trash is unlimited and unhindered by law.’ He criticized the aesthetic and unconscious adoption of Western styles and their pale and empty imitation.”²⁹

The language of colonization is entirely appropriate to the *Zenit* project. Pascale Casanova, in *The World Republic of Letters*, posits a geographical model for the distribution of cultural capital. Casanova argues that cultural blocks struggle for power and fight over borders that are related but not identical to their political counterparts. Culturally colonized spaces (i.e., the minor languages) are left in the conundrum that the Algerian writer Mohammed Dib has described powerfully in “Thief of Fire.” In what language is the “thief of culture” to write?

The poverty of the means granted to [the thief of fire] is so impossible to imagine that it appears to defy all credibility. Language, culture, intellectual values, scales of moral values, none of these gifts that one receives in the cradle are of any possible use to him. . . . What to do? The thief gets hold at once of other instruments, ones that have been forged neither for him nor for the ends that he means to pursue. What matters is that they are within his reach and that he can bend them to suit his purposes. The language is not his language, the culture is not the heritage of his ancestors, these turns of thought, these intellectual, ethical categories are not current in his natural environment. How ambiguous are the weapons at his disposal!³⁰

Tellingly, an acute interest in the revolts of Europe-apportioned Africa registers in the “Makroskop” sections of the *Zenit* journals.

The peculiar solution towards which *Zenit* aspired was not at this point a “greater Serbian,” but a cobbled-together Esperanto. The issues contain a veritable Babel of languages, with most poetry published in the original, and nearly always include pieces in both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. In recent years, post-Yugoslav nations have used translation as a divisive tool, for example insisting on the presence of simultaneous translators from Croatian into Serbian at political events, or on subtitles for regional films.³¹ By contrast, the lack of translation in these early *Zenit* journals suggests a radical unity through implied mutual comprehensibility. *Zenit* issued a cry of support for actual Esperanto—and for the figurative Esperanto of an increasingly visual language, whether experienced as modern hieroglyphics or as a magazine mimicry of film.

The Zenitists stole fire where they could. They mixed original Nietzsche with the Nietzscheanism of Russian modernists: the Balkan barbarogenius is the acknowledged country cousin of Aleksandr Blok's Scythian. *Zenit's* issue 3 opens with Blok's famous poem "We Are Scythians!" which itself went on to influence a century of Russian thought. Here, Blok's verses are printed in the old imperial Russian orthography and paired with an etching by Egon Schiele. The barbarogenius has Germanic DNA and Eastern European foster parents, or vice versa; to keep mixing family metaphors, a marriage was meant to follow the great divide: the East, through a transfusion of healthy barbarian blood, was to save old Europe from Spenglerian decline.

The cry of the barbarogenius is thus a plea for the mixed breed, and a bold claim that the margins might be the coming centers of a new world. If the Balkans could spark World War I, could they not spark salvation and the art of the future? Here is the rebellion of a small culture, a peculiar cultural postcolonialism, as well as the small-scale realization of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. *Zenit* appeals because it combines modesty with arrogance, and provides a kind of utopia that remains possible to get behind. Magazine utopias, at least, do not cause ecological catastrophes.

Avant-Garde Tradition

To return to an earlier question: who needs a tradition of the avant-garde? Many recent publications in the post-Yugoslav countries and abroad almost instinctively compare historical avant-garde experiments with contemporary art practices. Audiences and critics alike sense continuity between early dada shock art and the more recent work of someone like Marina Abramović, perhaps the most famous performance artist in the world today.

The most impressive English-language anthology on the subject of Yugoslav "historical, neo, and post-avant-gardes," Đurić and Šuvaković's *Impossible Histories*, suggests that historical avant-gardes are seen as "the precursor to modernism, while the neo-avant-garde is considered a critical practice on the fringes of mainstream modernist culture."³² The post-avant-garde in turn takes a "posthistorical" stance, commenting on earlier narratives at will, among them the previous avant-gardes. But this overview posits continuity, or rather contiguity, without much examination. Surely the post-avant-garde, should we accept such a term, is not actually posthistorical?

The real question is why should iconoclastic new praxes, defined precisely by their radical break with tradition, repeat earlier artistic movements? Is it unavoidable? Do these “returns to an avant-garde” merely repeat formulas that consistently *épater la bourgeoisie*: for example, by subverting an accepted cultural institution, whether by drawing a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* or by bringing naked bodies into the New York Museum of Modern Art? Or is the link between the two performances more profound?

The debate on the continuity of radical praxes has of course a life outside the Balkans. In the context of the Anglo-American poetic tradition, Marjorie Perloff has argued in *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* that we are currently experiencing a “carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form,” of the avant-garde project “at the very heart of early modernism.” She writes:

Indeed, what strikes us when we re-read the poetries of the early twentieth century is that the real fate of first-stage modernism was one of deferral, its radical and utopian aspirations being cut off by the catastrophe[s of the 20th century]. . . . Indeed between the two world wars (and well beyond the second one) it almost seems as if poems and art works made a conscious effort to repress the technological and formal inventions of modernism at its origins. Now that the long twentieth century is finally behind us, perhaps we can begin to see this embryonic phase with new eyes. Far from being irrelevant and obsolete, the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own.³³

Perloff intuits something deeply compelling, and her insights can be turned to suggest telling similarities as well as stark differences between the experiences of the pre- and post-Yugoslav avant-gardes. Any post-Yugoslav art must in some way acknowledge and grapple with the legacies of very recent violence, and cannot simply resume the deferred potential of an interrupted avant-garde project.

There is perhaps a counterintuitive conservatism to Perloff’s project, which seems to project something authentic onto the early English avant-garde; but a similar note tends to creep into any discussion of a return to the avant-garde. However, Perloff’s primary concern is with *the* internationally dominant language, and with the solitary intellectual practices of the so-called language poets—a sharp contrast to the minor, marginal, and collective Balkan avant-garde. Does the very marginality of Balkan avant-garde art create continuity for artists from the region, as a recurring theme and leitmotif of their work? Does that marginality encourage or necessitate an

interest in local precursors, despite the expected antitraditional bent of any avant-garde?

A recent Belgrade publication, Gojko Tešić's *Otkrovenje srpske avant-garde* (*The Revelation of the Serbian Avant-Garde*) argues that in the local context it is entirely necessary to consider the avant-garde a tradition. After gathering the Serbian avant-gardes of the twentieth-century under one cover, he concludes that the "stroll through the forest of the avant-garde naturally imposes talk of an avant-garde tradition."³⁴

Tešić argues that this Serbian avant-garde tradition shakes the paradigm of the avant-garde as discontinuous with modernism. As he puts it, "Even Ezra Pound at some point said that tradition should be understood as something beautiful to nurture, not as chains that bind. . . . The modern or rather avant-garde creator, in the act of negation, of overturning [a certain] tradition is in fact tracking after these earlier types of poetic experiment, which can be productive."³⁵ The "terminological chaos" that suggests otherwise, according to Tešić, confuses the issue and results from adopting terminology from the West, with its entirely different cultural context. "The strong influence of Anglo-American theoretical thought, covering a space in which the avant-garde radicalisms of the beginning of the previous century were not a massive phenomenon . . . imposed modernism as an established concept . . . on all tendencies of the modern type which came into conflict with every sign of poetic radicalism."³⁶ Yet Tešić turns repeatedly to Anglo-American thought to conceptualize his countertheory. His paradigmatic thinkers, no less than Perloff's, are Pound and Eliot. Furthermore, it is evident that his model is fundamentally internally oriented, positing continuity through national—that is to say Serbian—culture. Such criticism goes the way of Micić's own fate, moving away from the "Balkanization of Europe" to a retreat into the far less provocative "Serbianism."

The contemporary art praxes that are attracting the most attention, meanwhile, be it in the medium of film, in video or performance art, in new journals, or in various online incarnations, are doing just the opposite: opening the region up to international discourses and finding global relevance. It is precisely the work of artists such as Abramović, with her unapologetic post-Yugoslav identity, unflinching gaze at a history of violence, and resulting international significance, that to me continues most in the spirit of the early *Zenit* radicalism. And that spirit has never felt more modern.