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# The Slovene Historical Avant-garde and Europe in Crisis

Tomaž Toporišič

## Abstract

The article explores artistic initiatives giving shape to the multiple relations between the (theatre) avant-garde and the post-war crisis of identity in Slovene and Central European art and culture. It closely examines manifestative thoughts on Europe in crisis by Srečko Kosovel, the leading Slovene avant-garde poet, and Ljubomir Micić, the leader of the Serbian avant-garde movement Zenitism; Ferdo Delak and August Černigoj's manifestos of New Slovene Stage; and the concept of an expressionist play by Slavko Grum. The aim of the study is to show how the aesthetic revolutions of the historical avant-gardes of the region from the Adriatic Sea to the Western Balkan, were the artistic and human responses of the avant-garde artists to the newly developed crisis in Europe after 1918.

## Key words

Central-European avant-gardes, Srečko Kosovel, Ljubomir Micić, August Černigoj, Ferdo Delak, Slavko Grum, Europe in crisis

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This essay is the result of my research into the theatrical avant-gardes as a part of the project 'Odzyskana awangarda. Polska i środkowoeuropejska awangarda teatralna' founded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and programme No. P6-0376 founded by the Slovene Research Agency (ARRS).

## Slovene, Croatian, and Serbian avant-garde in the time of political, cultural, aesthetic, and ethical crisis

The following essay will concentrate on some artistic initiatives giving specific shape to the multiple relations between the (theatre) avant-garde and the post-war crisis of identity in Slovene and Central European art and culture. In order to achieve this goal I will link the specific manifestations of the aesthetic-revolutions in the sense of Jacques Rancière to these three artistic actions:

- 1) Manifestative and politically subversive thoughts on 'Europe in Crisis' by two prominent figures of the Central European historical avant-garde movements: Srečko Kosovel,<sup>1</sup> the leading Slovene Constructivist and avant-garde poet, and Ljubomir Micić, the leader of Yugoslav avant-garde movement Zenitism.<sup>2</sup>
- 2) Ferdo Delak and August Černigoj's manifestos of New Slovene Stage and Constructivist Triestine circle.
- 3) An expressionist play by Slavko Grum *An Event in the Town of Goga*, first performed in 1931.

Interpreting these as well as a few other notable examples I will try to show to what extent the post-WWI crisis in the Central European corner between the cities of Trieste, Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade<sup>3</sup> was linked to a political, cultural, aesthetic, and ethical crisis. Thus, a series of aesthetic revolutions (constructivist circle in Trieste, Tank and Dada Tank in Ljubljana and Zagreb, Zenitism of Ljubomir Micić in Belgrade, Delak's Worker's Stage and Grum's expressionist plays in Ljubljana) can be interpreted in two ways:

- 1) As a new understanding of the specificity of artistic production and a re-evaluation of the arts in terms of aesthetic sensibility (RANCIÈRE 2002), as a process that 'drastically disrupts things' (RANCIÈRE 2004: 37) but also affects the politics of the world around it: produces a new idea of political revolution: 'the material realisation of a common humanity still only existing as an idea' (RANCIÈRE 2004: 27).
- 2) As artistic and human responses of avant-garde artists to the newly developed crisis in Europe after World War I. The war resulted in the collapse of four multinational empires – the Russian empire in 1917, and then the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian,

1 Srečko Kosovel was a poet, who for decades after his death was known only for his lyric poetry. His *Integrali* [Integrals] appeared in 1967, revealing the poet's hitherto unknown face: his constructivist poetry. This visual poetry influenced the Slovenian neo-avant-garde group OHO in the 1960s.

2 Micić's work was characterised by polemical confrontation and clash between Croatian and Serbian culture, between two conflicting national ideologies following World War I. Initially active in Zagreb between 1921 and 1923, he relocated to Belgrade between 1924 and 1926.

3 The geographical and cultural area in question was marked by the avant-garde movements of Italian Futurism and Fascism, Zenitism of Ljubomir Micić, Russian and Slovenian Constructivism, German Expressionism.

and German empires in 1918. During the first decade of the post-war period, crises and high tensions undermined the efforts to construct a workable order and slowed down the recovery of a politically stable Europe.

The stormy period of the historical avant-gardes in the geographical basin of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more specifically during the period 1910–1930, bore witness to several waves of artistic and cultural as well as political movements. The avant-garde revolutionary and radical agendas of artists sometimes not only paralleled but collided with similar agendas of political parties and movements. Thus, the historical avant-gardes were marked by a provocation as well as resistance to the dominant ruling bourgeois society and its universalism in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With typical Central-European features the avant-gardes<sup>4</sup> and the artistic movements started with early Futurist experiments in Zadar and the magazine *Zvrk*, and with the ‘U futurizam’ [To Futurism] manifesto interpreting Italian and Russian Futurist ideas in a specific way,<sup>5</sup> only to be followed by the *Trije labodje* [Three Swans] formation<sup>6</sup> and the *Novomeška pomlad* [Novo Mesto Spring].<sup>7</sup> The avant-garde theatrical, literary, and visual arts activities continued with Zagreb/Belgrade-based Zenitism (*Zenit*) as well as the early theatrical avant-garde moves of Ivan Mrak<sup>8</sup> in Ljubljana inspired by Futurism,

4 According to Miško Šuvaković the term Central European avant-gardes ‘denotes avant-garde practices that emerged in between the spheres of influence of Moscow and Paris, including the Polish (Poznań, Warsaw, Łódź, Cracow), German (Berlin, Dessau, Weimar), Czech (Prague), Austrian (Vienna), Hungarian (Budapest), Romanian (Bucharest), Slovenian (Ljubljana), Croatian (Zagreb), and Serbian (Belgrade) avant-gardes. The Middle and Central European avant-gardes are so-called minor or “non-paradigmatic” avant-gardes, which means that they are characterised by left- or right-leaning intellectual artistic practices typically linked with either private actions or the publication of small-circulation avant-garde magazines’ (ŠUVAKOVIĆ 2016: 207). For more details see his essay ‘Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia’ published in *Filozofski vestnik*. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of the sources are mine.

5 A project of Croatian Futurism, *Zvrk* magazine was to be published in 1914 by a group of young writers led by Joso Matošić. The publication of the magazine was prevented by the outbreak of World War I and the arrest of Matošić and the two members of the group on suspicion of their involvement in the organisation of the Sarajevo assassination. For more details on this interesting manifesto that was prepared for the first, unfortunately unpublished issue of the *Zvrk* magazine just before the beginning of WWI, see (PAVLOVIĆ 2003).

6 The first issue of *Trije labodje* magazine was published in 1922 by Anton Podbevšek, Marij Kogoj, and Josip Vidmar. It represents the first stage in the establishment of the new Slovenian art, but it nevertheless does not have the originality and power of the daring *Zenit* and *Tank* magazines.

7 Novo Mesto Spring was a cultural and artistic manifestation in 1920, the main initiators of which were well-known Slovenian artists, including the poets Anton Podbevšek and Miran Jarc, and the painter Božidar Jakac, who also attracted artists of the younger generation – Ivan Čargo, Zdenko Skalycký, and Marjan Mušič. These artists, in cooperation with some others, prepared the 1<sup>st</sup> Regional Art Exhibition (the opening of this exhibition was on 26 September 1920), and the event was accompanied by a concert by Marij Kogoj and a recital by Anton Podbevšek and Miran Jarc. Thus, the Novo Mesto Spring assumed the role of national awakener and strongly influenced the work of artists in the 1920s, the most acclaimed being Srečko Kosovel who later contributed to the magazine *Trije labodi* [Three Swans], which began with a publication in 1921 in Novo Mesto as a result of the Novo Mesto Spring.

8 Ivan Mrak (1906–1986) was both charismatic and mysterious. In his work he focused on hymnal tragedies with a complex, somewhat patronising style. He was considered a great individualist, deeply infatuated with the power of his art. He lived and worked in Paris, Prague, Munich, and Zagreb. His most

and finally the Triestine Futurist Circle of the most prominent constructivist Avgust Černigoj and the highly individual constructivist poetry of Srečko Kosovel.

All those movements were interconnected and shared the interest in new, non-classical, left wing, innovative approaches to art and culture. The politicisation of the avant-gardes in Central Europe was, according to Dejan Sretenović, a consequence of ‘the transformation of a pre-war cultural discomfort into a political discomfort – that is, of a cultural radicalism into a political radicalism’ (SRETENOVIĆ 2020: 21). Thus, the avant-gardes of Central Europe were ‘cosmopolitan, sometimes with a radical component of proletarian internationalism’ (KREFT 2004: 18). They all searched for new artistic materials and innovative uses of language, but at the same time, they revolutionised the cultural field of the countries in which they took place: they introduced new ways of communication and new genres, as well as different kinds of manifestos and did their best to change the modes of artists’ social positioning. They tried to invent new media, introduce new standards and to establish new centres of the avant-garde that could decentralise the artistic maps of Europe and the world and add to the existing centres like Milan, Rome, Paris, Berlin, Zürich, Leningrad, and Moscow but also Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, as well as Zadar, Trieste, Gorizia, Novo Mesto, and many others. Their aim was to persuade the West, essentially the Germans and the Italians, that an unknown Slavic territory of avant-gardes exists.<sup>9</sup>

In order to research the specificity of Central and East European avant-gardes I will adopt the concept of ‘horizontal art history’ introduced by Piotr Piotrowski in ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-garde’, using a specific ‘deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art’ (PIOTROWSKI 2009: 54). I will relativise Western art history and place it ‘next to other art historical narratives – in accordance with the horizontal paradigm’ (PIOTROWSKI 2009: 54). The historical avant-garde movements from Trieste to Belgrade will enable me to reverse ‘the traditional view of the relationship between the art history of the margins and that of “our” art history (read: of the West)’ (PIOTROWSKI 2009: 54).

But let us go back to historical facts. From 1910 onwards, Slovene, Croatian, and Serbian avant-garde circles did their best to inform their audiences about new artistic movements, beginning with Italian Futurism. In Slovenia and Croatia, at that time still a southern Slavic part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Futurist ideas and artistic procedures soon became visible in the artistic activities of contemporary creatives. In Slovenia, Futurism did not become an independent artistic movement as in Croatia, but it was present nonetheless. In 1915, a year after the publication of the first *Zvrk* magazine issue, the 16-year-old provincial poet Anton Podbevšek (1898–1981) sent his first, unofficial manifesto of the new Slovene Art ‘Žolta pisma’ [Yellow Letters] to the editor of

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important expressionist play *Obločnica, ki se rojeva* [The Birth of an Archlight] was performed to great outrage in 1925 and disappeared only to be rediscovered and printed in 1987.

9 The problem with scholarly ‘recognition’ of Zenit and other Central European Slavic avant-gardes can be seen as reproducing the domination of the avant-garde centres with their ‘vertical’ optics over Peripheries. This problem was addressed by Janez Vrečko, Miško Šuvaković, Aleš Erjavec, Marko Juvan, and Marjan Dovič on several occasions.

the established literary magazine *Dom in svet* [Home and World].<sup>10</sup> But unfortunately there are no examples of his letters – which were obviously inspired by Marinetti's 1912 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' – prior to 1972, when this so-called avant-garde manifesto was first published.

The end of WWI also marked the beginning of the avant-garde movement in Croatia and Slovenia. Soon the Novo Mesto Spring was to come, one of the most interesting avant-garde peripheral artistic movements in Central Europe, with the painter Božidar Jakac (1899–1989), composer Marij Kogoj (1892–1956) and critic Josip Vidmar (1895–1992) joining the circle that soon became recognised by the authority of the time, the painter Rihard Jakopič. This first provincial art exhibition in the autumn of 1920 in the Windischer Salon in Kandija, Novo Mesto, under the auspices of the painter Rihard Jakopič, was followed by a concert at the Kamen Castle, where Marij Kogoj played music and Zdenka Zikova sang a number of arias. After that, an evening with the avant-garde poet Anton Podbevšek and the poet Miran Jarc took place in Narodni dom [People's House], to be followed by intense and stormy discussions about art and its essence and significance for man and society led by the critic Josip Vidmar and the painter Fran Tratnik.

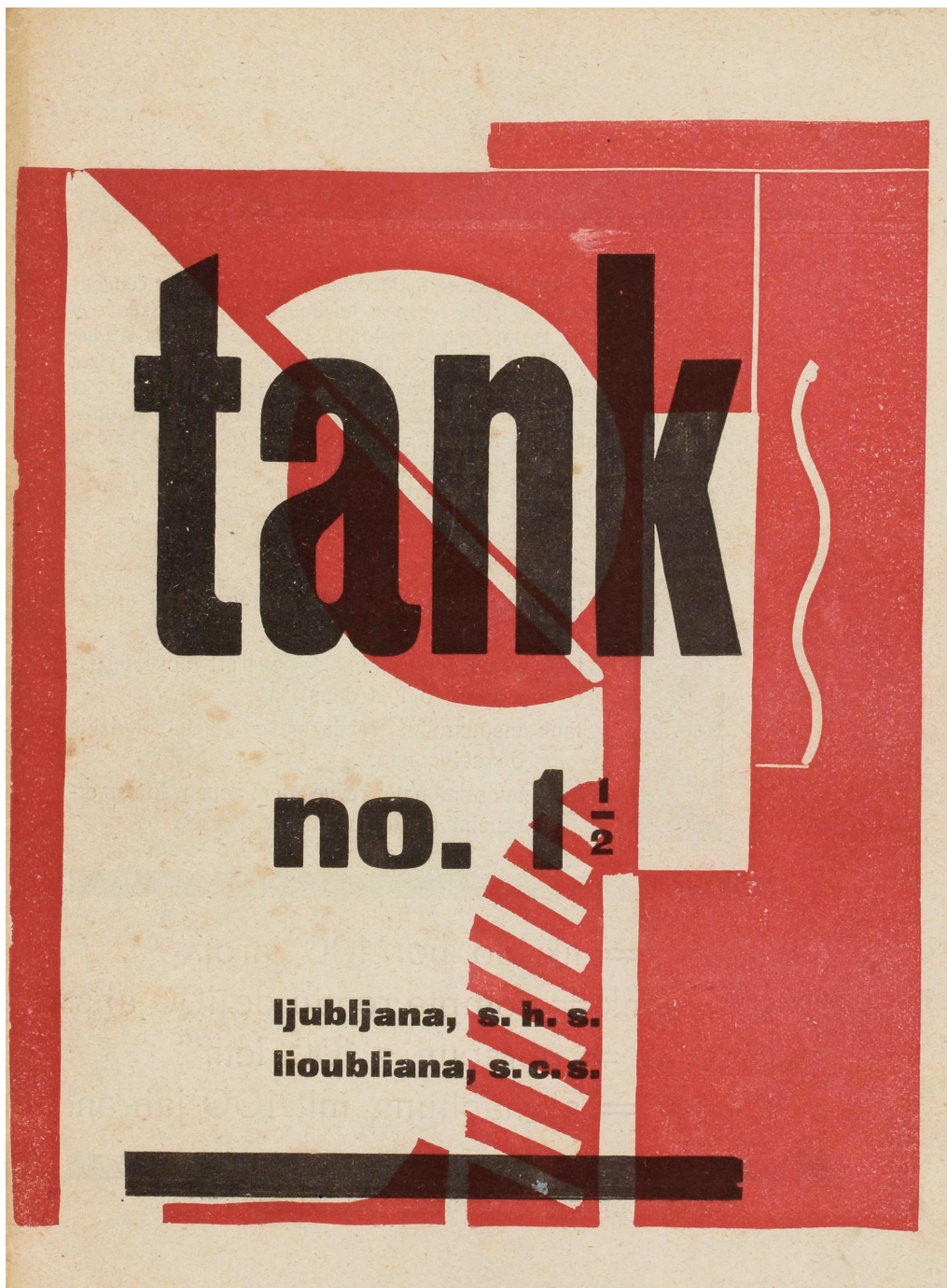
This movement marked the beginning of the highly effective links that were to be formed in the 1920s between the emerging artistic movements in Trieste, Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade. Among those movements, the *Zenit* of Ljubomir Micić became probably the most important turning point and a magnet for other movements trying to create a new European art, establishing links between the East and West, and the North and South of Europe. In a very condensate and short but intensive period, the publications and events followed one another with a great speed: one of the first avant-garde magazines in the region *Svetokret*, subtitled as 'the journal for the expedition to the North Pole of human spirit' was published in Ljubljana in 1921. This publication which can be interpreted as the specific, Ljubljana-based predecessor of *Zenit* magazine, was issued and authored by Branimir Micić (1898–1947) – a less known brother of a famous Ljubomir Micić – under the pseudonym Virgil Poljanski. *Suncokret* was to be followed in the same year by *Zenit* by Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971).<sup>11</sup>

The relations between Slovene, Croatian, and Serbian (or better to say Micić's) avant-gardes were sometimes very close; and nevertheless, sometimes quite unfriendly and rival as was the relationship between Podbevšek and Micić. Marjan Dović thus stresses the fact that 'the self-proclaimed "Balkan barbarian-genius" simply did not want to cooperate with the energetic "titan" in the neighbouring capital that shared many of his character's features: both were stubborn, authoritarian, and hastily ambitious' (DOVIĆ 2016: 237). However, if the influence of *Zenit* on the *Three Swans* was not clearly recorded, it played a much more important role with the third wave of the Slovene avant-garde and its *Tank* magazine in the 1920s (see Fig. 1).

10 For more information about Podbevšek's poetics and 'Yellow Letters' see (DOVIĆ 2011).

11 For a detailed storyline of the avant-garde magazines in the region see (SEELY VOLODER and MILLER 2013).

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**Fig. 1:** The cover of *Tank Magazine*, 1927. Iconotheque of SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

One cannot neglect the fact that Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian magazines of the time (such as *Dada Jok* by Virgil Poljanski, *Dada Tank* and *Dada Jazz* by Dragan Aleksić, and the Cyrillic surrealist *Putevi*, Podbevšek's *Rdeči pilot* [Red Pilot] (1922), *Ljubljanski zvon* [Ljubljana Bell]) most likely played an important role in the formation of the most prominent Slovene avant-garde poet Srečko Kosovel (see more in VREČKO 2005). The leading specialist in Slovene historical avant-gardes Janez Vrečko underlines the fact that

for some time Kosovel was quite dangerously burdened with Zenitism, mentioning it in his diaries every few pages. He attended two zenitist evenings in Ljubljana, and his estate includes several Zenitist publications, with *Zenit* and works from the Zenitist library even accompanying him home on his summer holidays in Tomaj. (VREČKO 2005: 178)

Kosovel's links with the international avant-garde scene were limited and *Zenit* played an especially crucial role in his formation. Quite obviously, Kosovel (as well as the Triestine Constructivist group) were inspired by thoughts of Ljubomir Micić and his manifesto text 'No Made in Serbia, Zenitosophy, or the Energetics of Creative Zenitism', published in Serbian in *Zenit* and in German in *Der Sturm*, in which he wrote:

European culture is cruel and cannibalistic. That is why Zenitists work on the balkanisation of Europe and want to expand their cultural nihilism to all the continents in the name of the new barbarism, in the name of new people and new continents, in the name of a terrible struggle: East vs. West! The Balkan Peninsula is a cradle of pure barbarism, which preaches a new brotherhood of men. That is the idea of our new culture and new civilisation, which will come of a final clash between two old giants, the East and the West, whose urge to fight each other is in their blood. (MICIĆ 2002: 517)

However, the link and the interaction of those magazines and movements with that of Ferdo Delak's and August Černigoj's became even more important as time passed. This can be clearly seen from the correspondence between Delak, Micić, and Černigoj in 1926 and 1927.<sup>12</sup> In his research of the Slovene and Central European avant-gardes Marjan Dovič thus emphasises some very interesting similarities between *Zenit* and *Tank*: they both 'emphasised internationalism that among other things was reflected in simultaneous multilingualism: set next to each other were texts in Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, Italian, French, German, English, and Esperanto' (DOVIČ 2016: 240).<sup>13</sup> Many of the artists were participating in both magazines; both Micić and Delak included a wide

12 For details see (GOLUBOVIČ 1987; KREČIČ 2011: 10).

13 At the top of the first page of the magazine appeared the contributors' names, including Avgust Černigoj, Ljubomir Micić, the Soviet cultural minister Anatoly Lunacharsky, Tristan Tzara, *Der Sturm* editor Herwarth Walden, the young Trieste-born Futurist Giorgio Carmelich, the pacifist novelist Henri Barbusse, and Expressionist poet Albert Ehrenstein. In the middle range of the page, the date of its appearance (6 May) was printed in Slovene, French, Serbo-Croatian, and German.



selection from the international network of avant-garde activities<sup>14</sup> within their attempts to form international relations and referred to the German expressionist magazine *Der Sturm*, Hungarian activist magazine *MA*, and the subversive and rhetorical provocations of Italian Futurism seen in magazines like *Energie futuriste*, Prampolini's magazine *Noi*, and Soviet radical Constructivism.

## The three phases of the Slovene historical avant-garde

The Slovene historical avant-garde can be divided into three phases, each centred on one group (KOS 1980a, b). All the three phases were under a strong influence of Italian as well as Russian Futurism, Constructivism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Zenitism.

The first phase was associated with a group that gathered in the small town of Novo Mesto from 1920 to 1925 and was led by the avant-garde poet Anton Podbevšek (1898–1981). Anton Podbevšek was the beginner and a main representative of the first, radical phase of the Slovenian historical avant-gardes. The titanic lyric subject, with the features of Nietzschean superman and Whitman's pantheism is characteristic of his poems. His initial enthusiasm for Futurism was later attenuated but his work was highly influential for the Slovene Constructivists such as the poet Srečko Kosovel, as well as the painters Avgust Černigoj (see Fig. 2) and Ivan Čargo, and theatre director Ferdo Delak, who later distanced themselves from Podbevšek. In the 1960s, the Slovenian neo-avant-garde re-discovered his work and concepts.

Together with the avant-garde composer Marij Kogoj, known for his opera *Črne maske* [Black Masks] (1929),<sup>15</sup> and the young critic Josip Vidmar, he founded the journal *Trije labodje* (1921) to be followed by *Rdeči pilot* [Red Pilot] (1922), subtitled 'a monthly journal of revolutionary youth for spiritual insurrection'.

The key figure of the second phase (around 1925) of the Slovene historical avant-garde was Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926) from the Kras (Karst) region near Trieste, today regarded as the most prominent Slovene avant-garde poet. In contrast to Podbevšek, he was not involved in any group activities and hardly published any avant-garde poems during his lifetime, but his Constructivist poems were published posthumously in the 1960s. He was acquainted with Malevich's Suprematism and the Russian Constructivism as well as theories of El Lissitzky. During the last years of his short life, he created a specific kind of Constructivist poetry, called *konsi*. Following Lissitzky, Kosovel managed to unite with *kons* (cons)

14 In a 1927 letter to Micić, Delak informs him that together with Černigoj he planned to launch an 'activist magazine', for which they had already provided 'sub-editorial posts in Germany (Hannes Meyer in Dessau), Italy (Sofronio Pocarini in Gorizia), Switzerland (Jean Bard in Geneva), and so on' (GOLUBOVIĆ 1987: 100). Micić as the 'founder of Zenithism and the first poet of the Balkans' was asked to take over the editorial role for France and Serbia (see GOLUBOVIĆ 1987: 100).

15 The music of Marij Kogoj was also known to Sofronio Pocarini, who used it in his *creazione scenica danzante* in the opening performance of the Compagnia del Teatro Semi Futurista on 1 April 1923.



**Fig. 2:** August Černigoj. *Teater - Masse*, Architecture of Tank's Theatre, 1928. Published in *Der Sturm*. Iconotheque of SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

the content and the form into a new organic whole, which links him with the Russian and European Constructivism (see VREČKO 2015). In subsequent years, *integrali* (integrals), a style that might have been inspired by German Expressionism, followed the *konsi*.

The third phase of the Slovene avant-garde developed in Ljubljana, Trieste, and Gorizia between 1925 and 1929. The group included Avgust Černigoj, Ferdo Delak, Edvard Stepančič, Zorko Lah, Jože Vlah, Ivan Čargo, Giorgio Carmelich, Ivan Poljan, and Thea Černigoj. Though it was certainly influenced by Italian Futurism, it also took inspiration from Srečko Kosovel's ideas of the new, Constructivist aesthetics, as could be seen in Avgust Černigoj's 1924 exhibition in Ljubljana. The group focused on visual and performing arts, which reached its zenith in Ferdo Delak's magazine *Novi oder* [New

Stage], in a theatre group of the same name, and in Bratko Kreft's theoretical writings on a Proletarian Stage.<sup>16</sup>

In case of Slovene historical avant-garde, the question of the political crisis in the central-southern part of Europe, in-between the Alps, the Mediterranean, and the Pannonian plain, is very much linked to political issues of complicated relations between the avant-garde and the post-war crisis of identity in Central Europe. The art of the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in this cultural and political geography was linked to the specific political situation of the newly established structures of the first Yugoslavia: Država Slovencev, Hrvatov in Srbov [The State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs], a political entity that was established at the end of WWI in October 1918 by Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs living in the southernmost parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although internationally unrecognised, this first incarnation of a Yugoslav state founded on the Pan-Slavic ideology soon joined the Kingdom of Serbia to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, a bigger but less democratic entity. From 1918 to 1929, it was officially called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and in 1929 the official name of the state was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by King Alexander. By the same time the rise of fascism in Trieste and Italy changed the cultural climate in what once was a cosmopolitan port of the Habsburg Empire: Trieste.

The avant-garde artists thus reflected in their works and programmes specific post-WWI geostrategic problems.

## Trieste as the liminal city *par excellence*: the rise of Futurism and Fascism

An excellent metaphor for a specific situation of the Slovene avant-garde is the city of Trieste, a city 'without a past', that was entirely oriented towards the future of consistently urban and mechanical modernity. For Marinetti, Trieste was virtually a new town, a town with no past worth mentioning, a town equipped and oriented towards the future, the third Futurist city after Milan and Paris (Marinetti quoted in GARY 1993: 85–86).

Yet, at the same time, the fascist ideology continued to combine Trieste *italianità* with modernity and the promotion of the industrial renaissance, especially the rebirth of the dying port of Trieste; this collaboration was symbolically celebrated on 20 May 1924, when Mussolini was awarded honorary citizenship. Trieste proved once more that it is a city of paradoxes: political and artistic. Katia Pizzi describes the paradoxes in details when alluding to 'copious, eminently forgettable poetry composed and published in Trieste in praise of the fascist regime and its leader Benito Mussolini' stressing that

16 In 1926, Bratko Kreft (1905–1996), then a 21-year-old student but already a leading figure of the Slovene leftist movement in culture, issued two articles in the magazine *Svoboda* [Freedom]: 'Proletarian Stage' and 'Repertoire of the Prolet-stage'. He claimed that the proletariat has to concentrate on a creation of a new type of theatre, a combative and socially engaged one. The workers' stages should stop the tradition of staging bourgeois plays and should concentrate on a socially engaged drama.

both Corraj (pseudonym of Raimondo Cornet; 1887–1945) and Nella Doria Cambon (1872–1948)

portrayed Mussolini as a catalyst able to draw together tradition and modernity without contradiction: this is of course a paradox, but an important one, and one that fascism borrowed largely from Futurism. The triumph of mechanical aesthetics and protoconsumerism celebrated by the fascists are redolent of claims that were advocated in the first place by the Futurist avant-garde. (PIZZI 2005: 244)

The Slovene avant-garde took Trieste as its centre and let itself be influenced by the radical changes that took place in the geo-political makeup of the Slovene territory before and after WWI. After the Great War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Slovene territory was split into three parts. One part, with Ljubljana as its capital, was given to the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (the forerunner of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which later became the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia). The second part, with Trieste and Gorizia as the two cultural centres, was allocated to Italy. The third part of Carinthia was allocated to Austria.

The Italian government introduced a policy of forced Italianisation in the former Austro-Hungarian territories it had received in exchange for joining the allies. This was intensified by the emerging Fascist movement, which pursued a strategy of terrorising the Slovene population with the aim of ultimately expelling them from Italian territory.<sup>17</sup>

[The city] ideally placed to promote its original multi-cultural identity, became instead (in the words of Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris) more frequently a ‘bulwark’ than an ‘open door’, a ‘crucible manqué’. A city aggressively resistant to external imports and influences, hostile in equal measure to the alien within its bosom as well as from out of its walls, an inward-looking and conflict-ridden dissident port steeped in its own malaise.<sup>18</sup> (PIZZI 2011: 31–32)

When in 1920, the Blackshirts burnt down the People’s Hall in Trieste, along with the Slovene Theatre, the cultural and economic centre of Slovene inhabitants of the city, Benito Mussolini praised this action as a ‘masterpiece of the Triestine Fascism’ (DE FELICE 2019: 625).<sup>19</sup> This brutal extermination campaign was stepped up during the period of the Fascist regime. Between 1922 and 1943, all Slavic organisations, cultural institutions, newspapers, and journals were forbidden in Trieste. In 1926, the

17 See the chapter ‘Italy Looks East’ in (PIZZI 2002: 180–192).

18 Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris in their study *Trieste un’identità di frontiera* link the city with the experience: ‘Trieste è stata e rimane ricca di contrasti, ma soprattutto ha ce cerca la propria ragione d’essere in quei contrasti e nella loro insolubilità. Gli che hanno vissuto a fondo la sua eterogeneità, la sua molteplicità di ele irriducibili a risolversi in un’unità, hanno capito che Trieste-come l’impero di cui faceva parte – era un modello della eterogeneità e della contraddittorietà dela civiltà moderna, priva d’un fondamento centrale d’una unità di valori’ (ARA and MAGRIS 1982: 4).

19 Mussolini’s ‘L’ora del fascismo’ of 21 August 1920 was reprinted in De Felice’s *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*.

Italian government announced the Italianisation of German, Slovenian, and Croatian surnames.

In this political climate, artists belonging to the Slovenian and Croatian speaking community were forced to link the Futurist ideas with those of the Fascist movement. The intellectuals of the period recognised a transformation of Futurist art into Fascist propaganda. During the Great War, Slovene periodicals and literary magazines almost stopped writing about Italian Futurism. Marian describes this situation as follows: 'Italian Futurism was becoming less attractive after 1920 (because of increasingly nationalist, anti-Slavic, and fascist overtones), and so the avant-gardes in Slovenia and Croatia sought other potential points of reference' (Marian quoted in DOVIĆ 2016: 244).

During this period and quite separate from the Italian national ideology, attempts were made by Giorgio Carmelich, Emilio Mario Dolfi, Avgust Černigoj, and other Triestine avant-garde artists to make modernism more open to European influences and therefore more cosmopolitan. Artists Milko Bambič, Veno Pilon, Ivan Čargo, and Avgust Černigoj published in the *Tank* magazine and saw Ljubljana as a very interesting artistic nucleus.

Because of his early Nietzschean belief, Constructivism was most likely particularly attractive to Srečko Kosovel as well.<sup>20</sup> He was strongly influenced in particular by Černigoj and his constructivist style, its characteristic free speech and typographic syntheses, with which he expressed concern for his own national identity. Kosovel flogged the Slovene nation and encouraged it to act (cf. 'I protest' and 'Pedigree')<sup>21</sup> and to think about the European future; this, of course, led him to the design of the 'Euroslav' *Revue pour une vie neuve en Europe*.<sup>22</sup>

The most fundamentally modernist and most valuable meaning of Kosovel's, Delak's, Černigoj's, Čergo's, Stepančič's Constructivism can be seen in their humanist, pacifist, and ethical socialist beliefs: the social revolution must remain constructive and not destructive. When in 1927, Černigoj published the manifesto 'Gruppo costruttivista' in Trieste; it was tragic that due to Kosovel's untimely death the year before, the Slovene constructivist poet could not contribute to this extraordinary work. Both Delak and Černigoj were, together with Kosovel and members of the Slovene minority, suffering under the heel of Fascist Italy. As a part of *Der Sturm* activities Delak was active in Berlin's league for social rights. In Vienna, he worked in the Theater der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe and in 1930's he even became a member of the Slovene section of the Italian Communist Party. In 1932, the Communist Party member Drago Gustinčič sent

20 The influence of Nietzsche on Kosovel and his constructivist *konsi* is analysed in detail in Matevž Kos's essay 'Kosovel and Nihilism'. He writes: 'In his text "Stojimo" [We are Standing], from 1923, he mentions Nietzsche and immediately goes on to talk about "the struggle for man and mankind", about the Slavs, who will save "the tired European man with their great will for life, with their juicy, barbarically joyous lust for life"' (KOSOVEL 1964–1977, III: 42). The same year Kosovel wrote in a review: 'If man wants to live [...] he must step into the surroundings. He is not a man of a rotten society, neither is he a man of the most ideal collectivity; he is man-god, Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. With him the world stands and falls' (KOSOVEL 1964–1977, III: 236).

21 For the Triestine context of the poems see (PAHOR 1993: 69).

22 See (PIZZI 2005: 109; PAHOR 1993: 69–70).

him to Ljubljana with his wife, a Viennese dancer Katja Pollak, to develop the Worker's Theatre. His aim was to create a proletarian theatre and collective drama.

However, let us return to Trieste in the 1920s, which became an example of a liminal city, locked between diverse, even conflicting memories, heritages, and cultures: 'from Mitteleuropean to Slav, from Jewish to Italian. Vertical, rugged, and angular' (PIZZI 2011: 33). Being aware of Futurism's contradictory attitude towards art and politics, and in particular of the movement's dependence on Fascist politics (KREČIČ 1982; KREČIČ 2011: 39) the Slovene Constructivists decided to move into the direction of Zenitism and Ljubomir Micić's concept of the '*barbarogenius*', which had the mission to oppose and overcome the decadent Western world. Černigoj and Delak embraced Zenitism as a counterweight to the Futurist-Fascist declarations of Italian superiority over Balkan culture.

They did their utmost to make the young Slovene avant-garde movement better known on the international scene. They received help in this undertaking from the Zenitists, especially Micić, who at that time was spreading the message of Zenitism in Paris. Thus, the third generation of the Slovene avant-garde veered away from Futurism and moved more towards Constructivism. This was partly due to the liberal-minded Constructivist International, and partly because of the ideologically and politically leftist group around Vladimir Tatlin, Ivan Puni, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Gustav Klutsis, etc.

## Slavko Grum's Expressionism, Freud, and the unconscious

In addition to the strong influences of both Futurism and Constructivism, the Slovenian artists, painters, dramatists, and composers were inspired by German and Austrian Expressionism. The Slovene version of Expressionism was very much linked to Germany and Austria, and the psychoanalytical trends present in its works were developed there. When studying in Vienna, Slavko Grum became acquainted with Sigmund Freud, as well as the modern avant-garde theatre (especially Max Reinhardt's production of Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Alexander Tairov's production of Wilde's *Salome*). He appropriated both influences productively in his most influential play *Dogodek v mestu Goga* [An Event in the Town of Goga] published in 1930 and first performed in 1931. *Goga* is a play about the psychopathic life in the provincial town of Goga. The story focuses on Hana, who was sexually abused as a child and now feels repulsed by anything sexual. When she returns to her town, her growing awareness of her life helps her to free herself from physical violence. However, *Goga* remains a play about individuals feeling trapped, about the burning desire to escape everyday life and the yearning for an event that would change the stifling atmosphere in the town. Unfortunately, *Goga* offers no salvation; everyone remains a victim of his or her oppressed and unfulfilled passions. The play belongs to the avant-garde plays of 'the interwar period' (i.e., between the First and the Second World Wars), and the avant-garde theatrical and scientific revolutions played an important part in its creation. They can provide the context for an initial understanding of the play.

*Goga* was probably the most influential new drama of the period.<sup>23</sup> As stated by Lado Kralj, it was a result of some Central European and a bit of provincial Austrian and Slovenian echoing:

the Roaring Twenties and the Charleston vogue, as expressed in music, dance, flapper dresses and bobbed hair on women; the Ouija board as the calling card of spiritualist, theosophical and occult sects, with the notorious Madame Blavatsky on top of them all; the new sexual freedom and women's emancipation; psychoanalysis or, more precisely, the consultancy of Sigmund Freud, in the conventionally middle-class, but still rather cramped flat on Bergstrasse 19, near Vienna's Danube canal. (KRALJ 2007: 89)

But also of some illnesses of the time: narcotic addictions, 'a psychosis of suicides by gas asphyxiation, swallowing match tips, and jumping off bridges; Russia's October Revolution and the threat of Bolshevism, the rise of Fascism and Nazism, and Blackshirts, Brownshirts [...]' (KRALJ 2007: 89).

Like Futurist, Dadaist, Absurdist, Surrealist, and Expressionist syntheses, plays, and sometimes anti-plays, Grum's *An Event in the Town of Goga* problematises the fundamental thematic preoccupation of Europe in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the crisis of the new in a world characterised by the absence of a god. In one of his interviews (something typical of his time, which we all too often forget) Slavko Grum described this situation in the following sentence: 'We should not forget Maurice Maeterlinck's statement that it is impossible to create drama in the world that is characterised by the absence of God' (GRUM 1976b: 423).

In *An Event in the Town of Goga* Grum offers us his specific version of the expressionist drama with a specific syncretic mixture of symbolism and psychoanalysis, namely, a psychoanalytic superstructure built on a symbolist foundation he describes in his 1930 lecture on psychoanalysis 'Beg v onstran' [The Escape Beyond] as 'magic circle of flights from consciousness' (GRUM 1976b: 428–429). Lado Kralj claims that this 'circle encompasses the substance of real life; within it, there is a smaller circle – "conscious reality" – which receives rays, or spiritual energy, from outside and far away on high, from the extreme edge of the world beyond, from the "radiation point of consciousness"' (KRALJ 2007: 94).

And when for his characters (as for so many expressionist heroes, Hinkemann among others), the real becomes unbearable,

conscious reality (the ego, the soul) transects life's circle at one of five circumferential points: dreams (daydreaming, art, religion); intoxication (alcohol, drugs); illness (neurosis, crime); death (suicide); or sleep. Conscious reality breaks through the circle and returns to its source – to the world beyond. (KRALJ 2007: 95)

23 For details, see (KRALJ 2007).

Or, as Grum puts it, 'I understand the Beyond as anything that is not normal conscious activity, i.e., the world of fantasy, the subconscious, intoxication, nothingness, and death' (GRUM 1976a: 432).

Thus, Slavko Grum linked Expressionism with Freud's idea that artistic activity is fully equated with other possibilities, among which suicide represents the 'most radical escape into the unconscious, into nothingness', and the artist is 'half-brother to the psychopath' (KRALJ 2007: 95). While doing so he does not invent a new, aesthetic world but derives his thoughts from his own life experience, mostly medical practice. Thus, the psychoanalytical traits of the characters in *An Event in the Town of Goga* represent a specific 'substitution of divinity by psychoanalytic release' (GRUM 1976a: 426). In his play (similarly to his short stories) Grum has portrayed people as puppets of subconscious forces, from which they free themselves by living out these forces to the full, just as a neurotic is cured through his confession to the doctor.

## Multicentred avant-garde movements

Unfortunately, the newly established independence of the nations and cultures, forming the First Yugoslavia (Slovene, Croatian, and Serbian) was soon to be minimalised by the authoritarian politics of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and its tendency to introduce politicised censorship and repression to the mainly left-wing avant-gardes. Černigoj was forced to leave Ljubljana immediately after his exhibition in 1925 and find exile in Trieste. Micić was imprisoned in 1926 because of his free thoughts in *Zenit* and released in January 1927 with the help of some political pressure from Marinetti. All hopes of achieving an autonomous Slovenian, Croatian (and Serbian) state-legal position within the Yugoslav state were finally buried by the Constitution of 28 June 1921. In 1922, Slovenia was thereby administratively divided in two parts, depriving Slovenians of one of their fundamental prospects of a harmonious national development – the unity of their own national territory.

This led to Slovene culture becoming divided into five territories, two belonging to Yugoslavia, one to Italy and one to Austria, and the fifth, much less culturally active, belonging to Hungary. The situation for the left-wing avant-garde artist deteriorated in Yugoslavia in 1929, when King Alexander abolished the St. Vitus' Day Constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, and disabled the driving force of the democratic parliamentary system – the political parties – by prohibiting and dissolving them. He furthermore renewed the enactment of the Yugoslav National Unitarianism and state centralism and defined Slovenians, Croats, and Serbs as 'tribes'<sup>24</sup> of the single Yugoslav nation (BONDICH 2005: 428).

24 Among notable supporters of Yugoslavism and a Yugoslav identity were famous sculptor Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962) in whose poetry he spoke of a 'Yugoslav race'; Jovan Cvijić who developed the idea of a unified Yugoslav culture and stated that the amalgamation of the most fertile qualities of our three tribes (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) will come forth ever more strongly. Eventually it will lead to a new type of single Yugoslav civilization – the final and most important goal of the country. For more details, see (WACHTE 1998: 92–94).



With the rise of Fascism in Italy and pro-Nazi and anti-Slavic policies in Austria after WWI, the situation for the development of independent national and avant-garde art was far from good. However, this situation strengthened Slovenian artists in their conviction that their majority national autonomist-federalist goals were well-founded and could give new perspectives for Slovene artists as a part of the peripheral regions of European avant-garde. Srečko Kosovel expressed this paradoxical specific mode of crisis in the form of the poem 'Ljubljana spi' [Ljubljana is asleep]: 'In red chaos a new humanity / is approaching! Ljubljana is asleep. / Europe is dying in a red light' (KOŠOVEL 1998: 99).

It is true that the storm of ethnic and political controversies and small wars transformed the space of Central European cities, rendering it impossible to speak of their unique art geography as something static. In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Slovenian avant-garde artists were in several states: Habsburg Monarchy or Slovenia as a part of Yugoslavia and Italy. However, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even smaller Central European towns like Ljubljana and Gorizia became small centres of mobility and global art transitions. They might be limited, but nevertheless: artists from different national and aesthetic backgrounds were (in the words of Éva Forgács) 'a beacon in the fight for the cause of the nation', but at the same time, they were also 'freedom fighters, ready to sacrifice themselves for the independence of the nation, its language and its culture' (FORGÁCS 2002: 47–49).

For most of the artists, the 'national' framework became outdated for the ideology of the avant-garde. Thus, the local avant-gardes suddenly became perfect examples of artists willing to cross ancestral and national lines and proved that there were whole streams of artistic movements, which evolved entirely separately from this unified national culture. While the first Slovenian avant-garde was hardly sufficiently integrated internationally and remained completely local, the third phase (generated in Zagreb with *Zenit* and Trieste with the Constructivist Circle) became explicitly cosmopolitan, 'seeking European acclaim on (at least) equivalent grounds. Its protagonists were utterly up-to-date and their artistic achievements worth noticing' (DOVIĆ 2016: 244).

Thus, individual artistic evolutions managed (influenced by Futurism, but also Bauhaus and Constructivism) to transgress the borders of different historical avant-garde movements. The question remains, however, as Dovič puts it, 'whether they really managed to intervene in the European avant-garde space as a force that helped shape it' (DOVIĆ 2016: 244).

Thus, the story that began with *Suncokret* and *Zenit* was to be continued with *Novi oder* and *Tank*. Its biggest international success was the lecture of Ferdo Delak on the new Slovenian arts in the house of Der Sturm in 1928 and a special issue of *Der Sturm* (vol. 19, no. 10) in January 1929 entitled 'Junge slowenische Kunst' [Young Slovenian Art].<sup>25</sup> This was probably the most successful presentation of the Slovenian avant-garde in one of the referential journals of modern European art. But, as was observed by Marjan Dovič, 'even though Slovenian contemporary art was presented in Walden's magazine

25 See (GREGORIČ and ŽIVADINOV 2011).

as an “active co-creator of modern Europe” (BALANTIČ 2011: 64) [...] after the decline of *Zenit* and *Tank* the radical and excessive avant-garde was all but withdrawn from both the Slovenian and Croatian culture scenes’ (DOVIĆ 2016: 243).

Unlike Trieste, the many other homes of the avant-garde in the region did not establish the large specific Trieste-like ‘Babel tower’ of the avant-garde languages of Futurists and Constructivists, translating and cross referencing each language to the degree that it did. They nevertheless became provincial capitals of new art: Novo Mesto with its Spring, Ljubljana with Ferdo Delak, *Tank* magazine and later Worker’s Stage, Zagreb with *Dada Tank*, Gorizia with Pocarini and his Guillian avant-garde movement, and Belgrade with Micić and his Zenitism and later in the 1920s the Surrealist circle of Marko Ristić, Oskar Davičo, and others.

The avant-garde circles and movements were constantly on the move. Slovenian Constructivism continued to blossom in Trieste, an Italian territory. Černigoj’s constructivist period ended in 1929. Nonetheless, the avant-garde did continue, for already in 1927 a group of Serbian Surrealists presented their works at the Fifth Yugoslav Exposition. Surrealism, a predominantly Serbian phenomenon in Yugoslavia, attained international recognition involving numerous poets and artists. Nevertheless, the political tensions in Europe were disturbing the development of the avant-gardes: When in January 1929 Yugoslavia became a dictatorship with the aim of accelerating national and cultural unification, Trieste was already deeply involved in the Italian fascist ideologies. In such political circumstances, the artists were committed to socially engaged art and literature. In this respect, the situation in the territory of Slovenia and Yugoslavia was no different from that in Italy or Austria. The open situation, so typical for the first years following WWI with all options available, ended both in Yugoslavia and in Italy. The avant-garde dreams seemed to evaporate, and the new war was slowly approaching.

At the end of the 1920s, the centre of the avant-garde activities moved to Belgrade and a new story of the Serbian Surrealists began that culminated with the almanac *Nemoguće/L’Impossible* and the Surrealist manifesto. Zenitism and Constructivism gave way to Surrealism, but they were rediscovered in the neo-avant-garde and post- or retro-avant-garde periods by authors and groups experimenting with new media, communities, and artistic procedures, namely, Pupilija Ferkeverk, Tomislav Gotovac, and OHO in the 1970’s, Dragan Živadinov, Neue Slowenische Kunst, Vlasta Delimar, Kugla Glumište, Ljubiša Ristić and KPGT, Ana Monro, Haris Pašović in the 1980s and Marko Peljhan, Branko Brezovec, Matjaž Berger, Vlado Repnik, and others in the 1990s. They were inspired by the artistic concepts, specific subversiveness, and formal procedures enabling them to invent new theatrical worlds and promote new cultural positions.

I will conclude my essay with an interesting quotation about the parallels between the 1920s and 1980s which shows us how the history of the avant-garde of the 1920s can be seen inspiring its descendants in the 1980s both artistically and politically, and in a sense, caused history to repeat itself. Aleš Erjavec details this fact as follows:



**Fig. 3:** Avgust Černigoj's sketch for the scenography of Tone Čufer's *Tovarna* [Factory], 1927. Iconotheque of SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Musicians and visual artists in the 1980s from various parts of Yugoslavia collaborated and influenced each other strongly. It is perhaps fitting that while the country was falling apart, at a time when hardly anyone on a global scale even mentioned the avant-gardes, its avant-garde artists brought the country together one last time—as they did in the early 1920s when Branko Ve Poljanski published his *Svetokret* in Ljubljana, Micić his *Zenit* in Zagreb, and Černigoj enthusiastically emulated the zenitist discourse. (ERJAVEC 2003: 61)

Thus, it can be said the wheel of history fulfilled some of the utopian ideas of the historical avant-gardes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The post avant-gardes of the 1980s and 1990s seemed to re-enact some basic ideas of the Constructivist and Futurist utopian questions raised by the avant-gardes: 'Fragmented, deconstructed, and appropriated in the global world of exchange [...] they present the foregoing avant-gardes as a lasting source of inspiration and a possible starting point for the work today' (TOPORIŠIČ 2013: 166). The new generations were proud to announce that they are the heirs of the artistic generation of Černigoj that wanted to promote Ljubljana as a centre of the new art, to establish a new bridge between the East and West (Micić spoke about

a bridge between ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’).<sup>26</sup> Or in a highly Futurist and Constructivist metaphor Ljubljana was the “garage” of fast-paced world beauty’, a centre from which ‘pilots prepare to fly around the world by means of mental machines’ (DELAK 1987: 5). This metaphor used by Delak has to be understood in the sense of the *Zenit-Tank* avant-garde notions of the rebirth arriving from the barbarian (south)east, their attempt to revolt against what Marijan Dovič defines as ‘the “asymmetry” of international artistic lines of force, an attempt to revolutionise the periphery-centre relationship’ (DOVIČ 2016: 245). The Slovene Constructivists and Serbian Zenitists were united by a thought about this asymmetry described with a specifically Balkan dark humour by Micić in his 1821 manifesto:

[D]o close the gate  
 East – North – and Central Europe  
 Barbarians are coming  
 do close do close  
*but we are going to enter anyway* (MICIĆ et al. 1921: 3).

In this sense, what Micić, Delak, and Černigoj did, has to be seen as radical attempts to redefine centrality and marginality, to (using the argumentation of Diana Mishkova) show how

margins do not merely exist as extensions of the core. They do not just come into being by the centers’ extending the capacity of ordering over space to also include the margins. The margins have an autonomy of their own. [...] margins challenge their asymmetric conceptualisation by the centre and assert agency through construction of alternative regional categories and alternative modes of collective identification. (MISHKOVA 2018: 144)

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26 See (MICIĆ 1921).

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