



# **Aesthetic ‘Traditions and Perspectives’ and the Politics of the Yugoslav 1968**

Estetske »tradicije i perspektive«  
i politika '68. u Jugoslaviji

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The article inspects the political character of the 1968 events in Yugoslavia against the background of culturalised interpretations of this watershed year in post-foundational theory and aesthetics. The article presupposes that to interpret the global 1968 in terms of an emergence of the political as an aesthetic, cultural subversion of outdated politics would result in a myopic conclusion that 1968 did not happen at all in Yugoslavia. Why is this so? In order to pursue this rather banal but pertinent question, the opposition between politics and the political will be extended along the lines of the dialectics of evolution and revolution. It is precisely the continuity of politics that can help us explain why the Yugoslav 1968 did not usher in formations that in the West were subsequently theorised as pertaining to the notion of the political.

MAY '68, YUGOSLAVIA, THE POLITICAL,  
OTO BIHALJI-MERIN, MIROSLAV  
KRLEŽA, THE ETHICAL REGIME OF ART

U radu se kontrastira politički smisao događaja iz 1968. godine u Jugoslaviji s etabliranim kulturološkim tumačenjima kakva možemo naći u postfundacionalističkoj teoriji i estetici. Osnovna pretpostavka teksta je da bi nas interpretacija 1968. kao globalnog fenomena, u smislu nastupanja političkog kao estetske i kulturne subverzije prevaziđenih politika, dovela do kratkovidnog zaključka da u Jugoslaviji 1968. uopšte nije ni bilo. Zašto je to tako? U svrhu pronalaženja odgovora na ovo jednostavno, ali relevantno pitanje, predlažem prošireno razmatranje dihotomije politika/političko na tragu dijalektike evolucije i revolucije. Upravo činjenica kontinuiteta politike u posleratnoj Jugoslaviji može da posluži kao polazište za odgovor na pitanje zašto 1968. u Jugoslaviji nije dovela do kulturnih i političkih rešenja koja su se na Zapadu, u retrospektivi, teorijski etablirala kao političko.

MAJ '68, JUGOSLAVIJA, POLITIČKO,  
OTO BIHALJI-MERIN, MIROSLAV  
KRLEŽA, ETIČKI REŽIM UMETNOSTI

## 1

Instead of referring to Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari or Michel Foucault to inevitably blame them for their undialectical development of these concepts, I prefer to refer to Sven Lütticken's framing of their political and aesthetic theory in a broader context of commodification processes that overtook the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s (see Lütticken). For the aestheticisation of politics, see Anderson: 136; for a depoliticisation of anarchism, see Taylor.

## INTRODUCTION

In the memory of the long 1960s, one particular idea is dominant, namely the belief that 'changes in the cultural sphere must precede social and political transformation' (Gilcher-Holtey 2008: 203). This understanding of revolution as a cultural rather than political turn-about flouts those outspoken and historically verifiable ambitions of the movement that cannot be short-circuited with anti-institutional, anti-statist, contra-cultural and subversive politics, or with libidinal economies, micropolitics<sup>1</sup> and the politics of aesthetics. In terms of politics, this is accompanied by a 'repudiation of old-fashioned class and party politics of a "totalizing" kind' (Jameson 1984: 192; see also Guattari 1995: 121, 123, Gilcher-Holtey 2013: 11–12). And in aesthetic terms, the culturalised memory of the 1960s renders invisible the fact that at least one part of aesthetic practices supported the 'idea of the Party as revolutionary vanguard' (Lütticken: 119). This has a series of implications.

First, the culturalisation or aestheticisation of the political 1960s ties in with a disregard for the historical revolutionary aesthetics that were aligned with organised politics and large-scale political movements. This primarily refers to the leftist interwar aesthetics that committed themselves to political purposes and sometimes deliberately renounced their modern right to autonomy. The normative definition of 'proletarian-revolutionary literature', delivered in 1931 by Oto Bihalji-Merin, is a case in point: 'By proletarian-revolutionary literature we mean literature that realises the world from the standpoint of the revolutionary proletariat and that educates the masses according to the tasks of their class and the struggle against capitalism.' (Bihalji-Merin 1978: 370)

Second, simultaneous with the (post-)1960s repudiation of or inconclusiveness about the ideological rationale of organised political aesthetics of the interwar era is an invisibility of those aesthetic phenomena that emerged around the global 1968 but did not follow the turn from politics to the political.

Similarly, the events in Yugoslavia never came to the forefront of post-1968 political and aesthetic theory for the very reason that the Yugoslav June 1968 resembled neither Third-World post-colonial liberations nor First-World cultural revolutions. Being evolutionary in a way that I will explicate below, and by simultaneously supporting the presumably outdated idea of organised politics, the Yugoslav protests, which emerged simultaneously in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo and other larger cities, simply failed to become 1968.

## I

Nowadays, the theoretical omnipresence of the political as the antipode and successor of traditional politics is enabled by the fact that the political is a 'purposively blurry notion' (Hebekus et al.: 13). In contemporary political theory, with post-foundational theory as a kind of ringleader, politics implies a rather conventional understanding of the business of politicians and political parties, movements, states or legislative frameworks. The political, on the other hand, presents a challenge to the established order, an interruption and perhaps even a break (see Bedorf and Röttgers, Esch-van Kan et al., Marchart: 35-60). Anarchic by itself, it suspends the symbolic economy of institutionalised, archaic, authoritarian, prescriptive, paternalist or pedagogic politics (which refers both to the politics of state and to the politics of revolution). Concomitantly, the political is semantically closely

related to the buzzword *revolution*, the perceived meaning of which is, paradoxically, synonymous with politics. The origins of this quid pro quo can be traced back to the 1960s: whereas politics was repressed in favour of the political, the term *revolution* itself did not disappear from the political and aesthetic vocabulary insofar as it was preserved in the guise of cultural revolution. Here, the unveiling of cultural revolution as a mere 'Scheinrevolution' (Habermas: 327) was referenced not only by the critics of the student movement but also by the movement's ideological tutors. In 'Cultural Revolution', a text that remained unpublished during his lifetime, Herbert Marcuse (123) noted that cultural revolution was a rebellion rather than a revolution and that it even '*absorbed*' the political revolution.

For the purposes of this article, it is of utmost importance to recognise that the political, besides presenting a revision of inherited political thought, draws its ground-breaking potential from art and literature (see Mouffe). However, this switch from politics to aesthetics is complicated by the consensus in art theory that, in capitalism, 'the redistribution of the sensible is overwhelmingly constrained by capital' and hence 'critique in and through art (the "empty space") cannot but be immanent and local' (Roberts: 224). Here, post-1968 thought (post-Marxism included) meets the solid ground of liberal aesthetics and its notion that art is an insufficient placeholder for absent politics. 'The result is'—if one is permitted to adopt here Blair Taylor's claim (737) about the political failure of anarchism—'an aestheticization of politics wherein taste and cultural preference become a cipher and shorthand for politics'.

Due to this theoretical focus on the shift away from outdated politics and towards aesthetic revolts (that is, towards the political), the Yugoslav 1968 falls out of frame of what nowadays counts as post-1968

thought. For reasons which will become clear below, the assessment of the Yugoslav 1968 (and of many related phenomena from the Second and Third Worlds) demands other analytical tools than those of contemporary post-foundational theory; in the Yugoslav case, what is needed the most is an analytical move away from the contemporary hegemony of the political towards the dialectics of evolution and revolution.

## II

‘We don’t have any special programme. Our programme is the programme of the most progressive forces of our society—the League of Communists and the Constitution. We demand its full realisation,’ proclaimed Belgrade students and professors in June 1968 (quoted in Pavlović: 69). Even a brief look at the slogans and programmes that emerged in June 1968 (see Pavlović: 40–50, Popov: 39, 96–97) reveals that the protesters adhered to the official belief that state-based politics was an ‘ontological prerequisite of freedom’, to use a formulation by Oskar Davičo (quoted in Popov: 151).<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the theorisations of art under capitalism as the bearer of a ‘promise of *total revolutionary praxis*’ which art cannot uphold (Roberts: 61), the Yugoslav 1968 did not promote aesthetics as a medium of melancholic self-reflection on its own catachrestic status of ‘art being in the world and not of the world’ (Roberts: 36). The political and economic foundations of socialism, in fact, remained determinants of aesthetic endeavours up until the beginning of the 1970s and the influx of post-structuralist tendencies.<sup>3</sup>

A tentative answer to the central question of this article—how is it that the specific post-1968 exchange of politics for the political arguably did not happen in Yugoslavia?—may rest in the character of Yugoslav aesthetics in relation to revolutionary politics, as these

**2** Davičo voiced this in his 1951 text *Poezija i otpori* (Poetry and Resistances), in the immediate post-Stalinist era. I quote it to suggest a continuity rather than a break between 1951 and the slogans of 1968.

**3** For the significance of the journal *Ideje*, post-structuralism’s gateway to the Yugoslav intellectual scene, see Jakovljević: 146.

evolved in the decades preceding the 1968 events. When pursuing this assumption, I follow Philipp Gassert's suggestion (124) that the perspective on 1968 be extended; however, instead of looking at later decades, I take into account the *longue durée* of the socialist emancipatory trajectory throughout the post-revolutionary 1920s and 1930s, the Second World War and the post-war systemic shifts. I contend that this reversal of perspectives helps us grasp the specific role of Yugoslav art and aesthetics and the fact that it did not usher in a rebuttal of foundational politics.

In the interwar period, attempts to develop organised politics and an accompanying (counter-)culture, supported by large-scale institutions (such as revolutionary parties and city or state policies), were a matter of course in the wide range of leftist positions. In this context, both literary production and criticism were confronted with the question of the priority in the relation between evolution and revolution: specifically, the dilemma was whether the liberation of humankind could be precipitated gradually, by cultural and educational means, or whether it demanded a political revolution. Whereas the first solution preferred gradual cultivation through arts and literature, those who argued for the second option claimed that the liberation of humankind could only be completed by political means—which could and should be supplemented by a cultural evolution, yet not replaced by it. This r-/evolutionary controversy was incited by Rosa Luxemburg's 1899 pamphlet 'Social Reform or Revolution?' ('Sozialreform oder Revolution?'), a far-reaching critique of Eduard Bernstein's study from the same year, *Evolutionary Socialism (Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie)*. Thereafter, their debate marked the insurmountable ideological, political and social schism between interwar social democratic advocates of gradual reforms and communist fighters for a global revolution (see Jameson 1981: 73).

In post-war Yugoslavia, whose navigation in the Manichaean Cold-War world was characterised by a unique third way, the r-/evolutionary controversy had a different trajectory than in other socialist countries, where the evolutionary (social democratic, anarchist and similar) positions were erased, but this trajectory was also different than the one in capitalist countries, where leftist traditions became substantially desolated throughout the Second World War. Thanks to Yugoslavia's exemplary position between the globally confronted political blocks, the Communist Party (called the League of Communists of Yugoslavia after 1952) was able to tolerate the challenges and even tacitly appropriate the legacy of social democracy. Although critical of reformist initiatives of non-party groups, and openly hostile towards those who defended social democratic positions, the Yugoslavia of the 1950s and 1960s brought forth the dormant potential of socialist ideas according to which social reproduction should be governed directly by producers and state property transformed into social property (see Vujić: 125). Encouraged by these developments, many prominent intellectuals committed themselves to the 'demolition of the dogma' (first and foremost, of Stalinism) and advocated for the 'freedom of creation and research' in place of the rebutted ideological 'nihilism and liquidationism' (Mikecin: 150). Consequently, the conditions became ripe for evolutionary developments also in the realm of art and through art (see Kolešnik: 69).

There is an overarching consensus among historians that during the rocking 1960s Yugoslav students had more things in common with students from Western, non-socialist countries than with those from the Eastern Block; indeed, 'the essential "east-west divide" described by some historians of 1968 existed more in the wishful thinking of socialist authorities than in the actual practices of student activists, who ignored this boundary with great abandon' (Fichter: 101;

see also Klasić: 154). Yet when it comes to the political and theoretical reappraisal of the June 1968 events in Yugoslavia, the simple opposition between politics and the political would force us to make the myopic conclusion that a Yugoslav 1968 never happened. Yugoslav students and workers (who partly acted in their support) differed from this pattern insofar as they did not contest the legitimacy of power relations as they had been constituted by politics.

If the cultural revolution in the capitalist West was critically recognised as a reformist development and therefore as mere evolution, this was merely an attempt to rectify its proclaimed revolutionary promises; the concomitant protests in Yugoslavia ensued under a socialist regime, which by the same token made them both reformist and evolutionary, yet in a diametrically opposite setting. Although Yugoslav counterculture was 'strongly reflective of the anti-authoritarian and participatory values that student activism sought to enact' (Fichter: 106), the authority of the Revolution and of organised (state, party, institutional, cultural) politics, which on its part drew much of its legitimacy from the liberation from fascism, was not put into question (see Klasić: 159–60, 191, 267–71). In contrast to their Western comrades, Yugoslav protesters called not for an overthrow of the regime but for a more inclusive, more just and more socialist socialism. Accordingly, renowned artists and intellectuals who took part in the political assemblies in June 1968 did not retract from or reach out for art as a kind of other scene that would act in place of politics. For example, Stevo Žigon's famous Belgrade staging of Robespierre's speech from Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death* (*Dantons Tod*) and Fabijan Šovagović's Zagreb recital of Miroslav Krleža's poem 'Plameni vjetar' (Wind of Flames) were performances delivered not by actors for their publics but by politically concerned citizens in front of other fellow citizens.

## III

The political engagement of artists not as artists but as public intellectuals is couched in the idea of socialist totality as it was established after the Revolution. According to Vlado Mađarević (49), 'Revolution can be accomplished only with a total purpose, that is, with the humanist aim of annulling every kind of totalitarianism and making impossible once and for all any kind of social coercion'. In this setting, it was primarily systemic matters (located on the economic and governmental plane), and not individual issues (considered as markers of 'private individualism and a lack of sense for cohesion' [Lukić 1968: 86]), that could account for the 'society in its totality' (Buden 2018: 138). Simultaneously, freedom for everybody was expected to come not from art or prominent artists but from the revolutionary organisation and, subsequently, the state. Therefore, in the Yugoslav 1968 the superiority of politics over aesthetics still proved to be a determinant. However, in the two post-war decades, intermittent developments and breaks occurred that need to be detailed.

After the Second World War, once the socialist state was established while the ideal communist society still had to be achieved, many insisted that the fault for the initial failures of socialism was, in Davičo's words, 'not with the system, the state apparatuses, but with us, as we are incapable of making use of the full capacity of freedom'. This meant that the state was more advanced than its citizens and that these should draw level with the former.<sup>4</sup> The task was to 'master the technique of freedom' (quoted in Popov: 151). In aesthetic discussions and literary criticism, this mastering of the technique of socialist freedom took place over a series of breaks, primarily those of 1948 and 1968. However, the breaks did not culminate in an 'abysmal'<sup>5</sup> stalemate

## 4

Recall that 'in the Marxian system, only a collective unity—whether that of a particular class, the proletariat, or of its "organ of consciousness", the revolutionary party—can achieve this transparency; the individual subject is always positioned within the social totality' (Jameson 1981: 283).

## 5

For the 'abysmal' state of communist and anarchist groups in post-war Germany, see Koennen: 260. For a related account of the paralysis of Western Marxism as a whole, see Anderson: 72.

ignorant and unaware of its own antecedents; instead, they were performed as acts of self-reflection, self-criticism and synthesis.

For example, Petar Šegedin discussed the incongruence of theory (exegetically explained by the Party) and praxis (actual living worlds of socialist citizens) with regard to literary criticism. In 'O našoj kritici' (On Our Criticism), a speech he gave in 1949 at the Second Congress of Yugoslav Writers, Šegedin exercised a kind of collective self-criticism, speaking virtually on behalf of Yugoslav literary criticism as such. Here, the fault of 'our' theoretical attitude consisted in a reductionist orientation towards immediate political goals. Having debased itself to a pragmatic, limited practice, our criticism resembled the work of a merchant who, trading minerals, judged his stones according to their value as commodities and was unable to see their beauty. Against this background, Šegedin (116) posed the following rhetorical question: 'How can a critic behave when he excludes the criterion of "human sense, of what corresponds with the whole fortune of human and natural being", if all he has at his command are intellectualised notions of decadence, formalism, chauvinism, bourgeois objectivism, anti-humanism, etc.?' In Šegedin's view, the Party was still in command of the proper comprehension of this Marxian 'human sense, of what corresponds with the whole fortune of human and natural being'. This was a gesture of loyalty and an unmistakable sign of adherence to top-down politics, and yet it functioned also as a marker of an evolutionary extension of the otherwise steadfast revolutionary framework.

Miroslav Krleža's subsequent 'Govor na Kongresu književnika u Ljubljani' (Speech at the Third Congress of Yugoslav Writers in Ljubljana) served as another milestone in these evolutionary developments. His lecture, delivered in 1952, is remembered as a watershed moment,

an exemplary break and inaugural moment of free artistic expression (see Šicel) and of an 'aesthetics of the fundamental ego' (Lasić: 161)—contemporary reactionary academics see it even as an onset of 'various cultures of dissent' (Bing et al.: 100). An upgraded reading of Krleža's lecture, however, may arouse a suspicion that this cultural bard still basically adhered to what Jacques Rancière (135) critically denominates as the ethical regime of art: 'In the ethical regime, works of art have no autonomy. They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community. Plato's Republic offers a perfect model of this regime.'

Undoubtedly, Krleža's idea of literature had a straightforward social, ethical duty: 'Our socialist literature has to defend the South-Slavic socialist status quo because, in this way, it defends our socialist and therefore, logically, also our popular and cultural survival.' (Krleža 1952: 238) However, his defence of an ethical regime—specifically, 'our' ethical regime—was also accomplished through a normative discharge of the hard-boiled doctrine of socialist realism—which is a point Rancière himself does not cease to reiterate in relation to the ethical regime of art. Yet in contrast to Rancière's poetics of hybridity (for which see Perica), Krleža's 'middle position' (Pantić: 193) was still placed within the narrative of socialist telos. Against Todor Pavlov and Andrei Zhdanov's 'programmatically iconography', Krleža (1952: 226) pleaded for socialist art that would be able to provide 'the objective motives of our leftist reality with subjective reflection' (Krleža 1952: 243). In contrast to his interwar refusal to provide a simplified appeasement of art and revolution, or aesthetics and politics, in 1952 Krleža (193) opted neither for aestheticism nor for directly political art but for a surpassing of these two positions by way of what he called 'authentic aesthetic socialist commitment—political commitment through an autonomous

sphere of art'. Now, although Rancière and many other theorists working today defend a similarly mediating idea of aesthetic commitment via aesthetic autonomy, the decisive difference between contemporary positions and Krleža lies in the aporetic and hence apolitical character of the former (see Sonderegger, Roberts: 258).

Moreover, Krleža's idea of committed autonomy astonishingly resounds with Georg Lukács's late work on an aesthetics that bears the principle of *tertium datur* as its core element. Not unlike Lukács, who insisted on the specificity of the aesthetic (see Lukács 1987) and appreciated art's social commission (*sozialer Auftrag*), which in Lukács is only intelligible under conditions of socialism, Krleža discussed art's duty towards a collective horizon that presupposed a dialectic integration or synthesis of distant and even fallacious components into a new socialist totality. This 'synthesis' should not be a 'cult of romantic phrases but a true poetic representation of facts'; hence, '[t]he tremendous amount of impressive creative matter should be given a programmatic framework, and the tragedy of our own divisions and mutual negations should be explained and construed—therein should our primary mission lie' (Krleža 1952: 242).

Against ingrained interpretations of this speech as a sign of the freedom and historical victory of Art, I contend that Krleža's *tertium datur* was enabled due to a change in political conditions—the establishment of a socialist state that provided institutional support for organised culture, which on its part acted on behalf of the official ethical regime of art. In other words, Krleža's political commitment via aesthetic autonomy became possible only after he acknowledged, in contrast to the interwar years, the primacy of politics over the political. His change of course—from aporetic and therefore counterrevolutionary 'solipsistic mystifications', to use a characterisation

by Bogomir Hermann (A.B.C.: 307), towards a recognition of the state as the guarantor of 'our' freedom—illuminates the fact that the evolutionary perspectives in post-war Yugoslav acknowledged the necessity of rule and power.

#### IV

These landmarks show that Yugoslav aesthetics in the decades prior to the events of 1968 were marked by an overall agreement with the primacy of politics. Similarly, and in contrast to a far-reaching renouncement of institution, ideology and authority by a significant faction of the First-World 1968, the Yugoslav 1968 did not harbour any ambition to put forth the political in order to replace a compromised politics. In this section I shall outline pertinent early developments that gesture towards a possible explanation for this state of things. To this end, I shall delve into the ideological trajectory of Oto Bihalji-Merin, one of the most renowned Yugoslav editors, art historians and writers. By taking into account the interwar developments and by contouring the political, economic and aesthetic trends throughout two and a half post-war decades, I read Bihalji-Merin's career in terms of the development from revolution to evolution. Here, I propose the thesis that there is a continuity here that leads almost seamlessly from the former to the latter—a thesis that interprets Bihalji-Merin's and similar careers as being exemplary of a Rancièrian ethical regime of Yugoslav art and politics. Over the decades, this regime—and Krleža and Bihalji-Merin were only its most prominent representatives—relied on similar material and structural foundations of the socialist state (see Kirn: 252), in return effecting proxy impacts on the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the Yugoslav 1968.

Much like Miroslav Krleža, Bihalji-Merin belonged to those authors and critics who in the 1920s committed themselves to communist cultural activism; however, due to either their bourgeois origin or their proclivity for nineteenth-century high culture and liberal (that is, bourgeois) aesthetics, they were occasionally regarded as being estranged from revolutionary Marxism and hence counter-revolutionary. Yet in contrast to Krleža, Bihalji-Merin submitted himself early on to the goals of an organised communist counterculture and even played an important role in the establishment of a transient episode of Yugoslav socialist realism. In order to outline his ideological pathway from revolution to evolution, I first quote from his 1929 text 'Povodom jedne umjetničke izložbe u Beogradu' (Considering a Recent Art Exhibition in Belgrade), in which he criticised the 'muse of the bourgeois art which inspires only pointless aestheticisation or graceful virtuosity' (Biha 1929: 56):

*Art stands in the service of progress. In the dialectic process of economic and spiritual mutual powers, art is one of the factors of either progress or reaction. That is why we are uncompromising in our criticism. We cannot bow in front of beauty. We ask: whom does beauty serve? Someone who after successful stock exchange transactions takes 'his soul' for a walk through the gardens of beauty? Or those who in their miserable life walk the path of misery? (Biha: 1929: 57)*

Similar statements can be found also in the texts he published in *Die Linkskurve*, the leading German communist literary journal between 1929 and 1932. Bihalji-Merin was an editorial-board member and for some time even the chief editor of *Die Linkskurve*. After an intervention of a left opposition inspired by the Russian Association of Proletarian

Writers (RAPP), and after the onset of the 'Wendung' (for which see Becher), Bihalji-Merin was briefly dismissed from the editorial board. Unlike Krleža, he then started to promote the proletarian mass novel (*Massenroman*), which was conceptualised as a conscious and progressive appropriation of nineteenth-century bourgeois literary forms with the aim of encouraging broad layers of society to join the communist movement (see Gallas: 66).

In the early post-war years, Bihalji-Merin even acted as an important promoter of socialist realism in Yugoslavia. Forty-four issues of *Jugoslavija-SSSR—Časopis društva za kulturnu saradnju Jugoslavije sa SSSR*, a monthly journal which he edited from 1945 to 1949, serve as outstanding study material of the Rancièrian ethical regime in Yugoslavia. S. P. Lebedjanski's 1947 report (9) on 'Izložba dela sovjetskih slikara u Beogradu' (Belgrade Exhibition of Works by Soviet Painters) illustrates the ethical foundations of socialist realism at its best: 'Soviet art is unfamiliar with unimaginative formalistic buffoonery. In his works, the Soviet painter endeavours to express thoughts, feelings and efforts of the people, of its leaders, its heroes and its famous men.' Evidently, Lebedjanski erects socialist realism by detaching it from the class enemy of formalism. Furthermore, the painter is not only 'a' painter or perhaps a socialist realist painter, but a Soviet painter. He does not announce possible worlds to come but pedagogically depicts what already is: 'thoughts, feelings and efforts of the people'. The 'people' are on their part associated with heroic, outstanding and exemplary figures: 'leaders', 'heroes', 'famous men'. Reading these kinds of contributions to *Jugoslavija-SSSR*, one is reminded of the quality that Ljiljana Kolečnik (32) ascribed to socialist realism as a whole, namely that these contributions testify to the infamous ideological 'monosemy' and that 'it is hard to resist the impression that all the time we have only one and the same text in front of us'.

6  
*Socialist modernism* would be an alternative term. As the present discussion draws on continuities between post-war socialism and the interwar era, when it was aestheticism and not modernism that was repudiated, here I prefer to invoke socialist aestheticism because it implicitly refers to the once controversial status of selected movements in modern art.

It would, however, be false to assume that the successor journal, *Jugoslavija: ilustrovani časopis*, which was launched in 1949 after the proverbial break with Stalin and discontinued ten years later, introduced any 'freedom of creation and research'. With the new monthly, Bihalji-Merin made a sharp turn towards art movements he had already discarded, including impressionism and expressionism. The journal's evolutionary extension of revolutionary aesthetics revalued the modern aestheticism that had previously been rejected for being decadent, formalist or even morbid (see Šegedin: 116, Lukić 1968: 25). In the late 1940s, this promoted the journal's editor to the role of a 'backer' (Jakovljević: 17) of so-called 'socialist aestheticism' (Lukić 1968: 85, Jakovljević: 10, 17, 83–98).<sup>6</sup> However, *Jugoslavija* was still financially fostered and ideologically empowered by the state, which the monthly supplied with new, hitherto liberated aesthetics in return.

Maintaining 'many traits of the previous phase' (Lukić 1975: 241), socialist aestheticism reflected the new political and social constellation that came into life after the Resolution of the Informbureau and especially with the implementation of the foreign policy of non-alignment and the domestic policy of self-management (introduced in 1951). It supported the new ethos of non-authoritarian socialism and was thus still in tune with the collective, representative aesthetic ethos. Here, instead of hastily proclaiming the end of the ethical regime in art for the sake of challenging the otherwise fitting claim that in the new journal 'a detachment from the former "ethical" mission of art proves to be conspicuous' (Jakovljević: 51), one should be aware of the continuities as well as the breaks within the socialist ethical regime. Bihalji-Merin's invention of socialist aestheticism, with its new appreciation for those formalist practices that the accelerated historical pace had dismissed for being irrational and politically misleading,

was not an automatic appropriation of the counterpart (the liberal aesthetics of the capitalist era), but an affirmation of a conspicuously socialist *tertium datur*, which, moreover, was 'the third and real solution' (Lukács 1975: 521) to the dilemmas between free and committed art, the high and the low, and capitalism and communism.

In his 1957 text 'Tradicije i perspektive' (Traditions and Perspectives), Bihalji-Merin spoke from the point of view of post-war Yugoslav art and stressed the specific historical conjuncture 'in which all that was once needed to be fought for has a natural, self-evident right of existence'. The 'young generation of Yugoslav artists' was born into a world that now—thanks to its systemic coordinates, one may add—allowed for those artistic articulations that in times of strong political struggles were considered as misleading. This generation demanded 'recognition and acceptance even for its most fantastic experimental modes of expression' (Bihalji-Merin 1957: 12). Bihalji-Merin's acceptance of the manifold forms of expression of this new generation is, however, not to be understood as an invocation of irrational forces (the 'corporeal wants, dark passions and egotistically impure drives', as they were vaunted in Krleža's 1933 introduction to Krsto Hegedušić's book of drawings [Krleža 1933: 11]), but as an extension and merger of formerly acuminated ideological fronts. Implicitly, Bihalji-Merin here worked in line with Krleža's post-war demand that '[a]ll things be discussed with regard to their particular space and time' (Krleža 1952: 319). Much like the state as a whole, socialist aesthetic theory was now able to acclaim those evolutionary artistic expressions that turned towards the inner anthropological, emotional and ontological problems of the human being, as well as to his or her individual poetic being (see Mađarević: 19). In this context, although he repeatedly stressed art's own autonomous means of expression, Bihalji-Merin promoted

neither a notion of a self-contained, transhistorical artwork nor the idea of a fundamental artistic ego:

*The style of a particular time is a distinctive handwriting of the collective in question. The individual artist may believe that he draws his creation from his most hidden 'I'. The presence of a commonality that surpasses the individuality nonetheless shapes the style of his time. Surely, for the contemporaries the general traits are often overshadowed by the personal ones, yet the time distance makes the big, consistent traits of the epoch come to the fore. (Bihalji-Merin 1955: 3)*

In Bihalji-Merin's synthetic vision, one particular art form accomplished the desired conceptual integration of interwar revolutionary efforts with post-war evolutionary concessions. This was naive art in its modern inception (Henri Rousseau), interwar variants (including the Zemlja group in Yugoslavia) and post-war climaxes from Africa and Haiti (see Bihalji-Merin 1971). In the Yugoslav context, it was naive art in particular that signalled the break with socialist realism without abandoning figuration. Simultaneously, it functioned as a counterpart to the rise of non-figurative and abstract tendencies (see Zimmermann: 196). Here, we can take a look at yet another ideological dimension of Bihalji-Merin's aesthetic preference for naive art and its *tertium datur*: the possibility of appreciating this art appears as an emblematic proof of the historical resolution of the controversy over evolution and revolution. If, in the 1920s and 1930s, evolutionary and revolutionary positions debated over what comes first—political revolution or aesthetic evolution—the formation of the socialist state rendered this quandary invalid. Similarly, Yugoslav naive art (and Zemlja in particular) was promoted from an example of “left” formalism’ (as Grgo Gamulin

dismissed it in 1946 [quoted in Kolečnik: 44–45]) to an authentic mode of Yugoslav aesthetic expression. In a nutshell, it was only after the victory of the revolution that evolution could become acceptable.

## V

So went the official story. Notwithstanding the compelling power of this interpretative framework or ‘jargon’ (Močnik: 30–31), a series of protests and demonstrations from the 1950s and 1960s (see Fichter: 104, Vučetić) testified to the fact that the resolution of the r-/evolutionary controversy, however sophisticated in a theoretical sense, displayed flaws in everyday praxis. A mere glance at the sociological data relating to the first two post-war decades (see Popov: 126–27, 184–85) speaks volumes about the insufficiency of the redistribution of the sensible in terms of an authentic socialist becoming of individual political subjects. There is, thus, a flip side to the Yugoslav ideal-typical development towards a historical and ideological synthesis, namely the gap between the lived experience of the people and the theoretical formulas offered by the political and aesthetic establishment. On the other hand, slogans from June 1968 demonstrate that there still existed a clearly identifiable homology between these two levels; thus, we indeed can assume that on the plane of ideology and art production a ‘divide between “official” and “unofficial” culture’ was inexistent (Bago: 27).

In his recent book on performance art in Yugoslavia, Branislav Jakovljević demonstrates that Yugoslav socialist aestheticism functioned as a revamped version of socialist realism, whereby the realist component was abandoned but the socialist horizon was preserved. Therefore, especially when it comes to its ethical dimension — ethics standing here for the centrality of socialist totality in the sense explicated above (that

is, totality in the Marxian 'human sense, of what corresponds with the whole fortune of human and natural being')—instead of looking at the breaks it is more advisable to search for the continuities of the socialist ethics, continuities that became evident after the supposed end of socialist realism. The continuity thesis advanced above suggests that a certain socialist rationale was sustained throughout the 1950s and 1960s which was still able to prove its political viability in June 1968. Accordingly, even those who acted as advocates of freedom of speech and unbounded creativity were in consensus with the overall political and aesthetic setting.

### **CONCLUSION**

Let me summarise my argument and bring the continuity thesis to a close. With the turn towards socialist aestheticism, Bihalji-Merin neither simply exchanged content-oriented aesthetics for its formalist counterpart nor did he abandon the ethical regime for the sake of some historically and artistically superior aesthetic regime (for this superiority, see Rancière: 135). Expressed in terms of Kolečnik's (34) systematisation of three elementary traits of socialist realism—socialist idea, partiality and the popular spirit—socialist aestheticism came into being following the rejection of militant partiality. At the same time, socialist aestheticism upheld the unmistakable allegiance to the idea of socialist totality, the teleological notion of universal human progress included. In a similar vein, the Yugoslav 1968 did not signal a break with the Party, but instead exercised a comradely critique of its leadership for not fulfilling the duties and promises of the Revolution. As partiality—in the meaning of loyalty to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia—ceased to be unquestionable, socialism—in the meaning

of both humanist striving for freedom and adherence to the established socialist polity—was reinforced.

In 1968, this ultimate horizon of socialist totality still proved its validity for those who exerted social and political criticism. Although the presumed historical resolution of the r-/evolutionary controversy was ‘part of the strategy of domination in the conditions of socialism’ (Močnik: 30), and although Krleža and Bihalji-Merin, as respectable citizens, were, in fact, ‘hovering above socialist reality’ (Pantić: 197) and were thus part of the problem rather than part of the solution of the relations of hegemony in Yugoslav society, it is pivotal that they acted in support of the idea of a hierarchical relation of politics and the political and that in 1968 this idea was still upheld by the coming generation. If the *longue durée* of Yugoslav political aesthetics was related to the 1968 protests at all, it was through this assumption of a secondary, even subservient position of art in relation to politics. Famed film director Želimir Žilnik’s claim that ‘the emancipatory promise of culture is a bluff’ (Buden 2010: 47) could be used here to encapsulate the entire thesis of my article: the Yugoslav 1968 did not propel any countercultural aesthetics, subversion or micro-politics precisely for the reason that, against the socialist horizon, the political could never have recuperated for the failings of politics. This then explains why Yugoslav protests, rather than ushering in the political, demanded reforms on the plane of politics. ♡

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## Povzetek

Članek raziskuje politični značaj leta 1968 v Jugoslaviji, pri čemer se v prvi vrsti ograjuje od kulturoloških razlag tega prelomnega leta, kakršne pogosto srečamo v post-fundacionalni politični in estetski teoriji. Članek oriše zgodovinski razvoj razmerja med politiko in estetiko, kakršen se zgledno kaže v ideoloških premenah dvojice ključnih jugoslovanskih intelektualcev: Miroslava Krleže in Ota Bihalji-Merina.

Temeljna predpostavka je, da bi nas opazovanje globalnih razsežnosti leta 1968 zgolj z gledišča političnega (kot estetske ali kulturne subverzije, ki spodkopava tradicionalno politiko) zavedlo v prehitel sklep, da se leto 1968 v Jugoslaviji sploh ni zgodilo. K temu preprostemu, a daljnosežnemu dejstvu lahko pristopimo tako, da dihotomiji politika/politično dodamo dialektiko evolucije in revolucije. Pri tem je ključen pojem (r)evolucionarnega spora, ki je zgodovinsko utemeljen v medvojnih ideoloških polemikah med revolucionarnimi komunisti in evolucionarnimi socialdemokrati. Ta spor se je zaostрил ob vprašanju, ali je v emancipacijskem boju bistven revolucionarni političen obrat (rušenje kapitalističnega sistema kot takega) ali postopna priprava na oblikovanje nove družbe (kjer obstoječega stanja ne razstavimo, ampak ga popravljamo s pomočjo kultiviranja v sferi umetnosti, izobraževanja in športa). Po drugi svetovni vojni se je ta spor v kapitalističnem svetu rešil drugače kakor v socialističnem. V Jugoslaviji je izgradnja socialistične države zagotovila sistemske pogoje za legitimnost tistih kulturnih prizadevanj, ki so jih komunisti v medvojni fazi razrednega boja zavračali kot zgolj evolucionarna; v nasprotju z uradno in v določeni meri nesporno tezo o tem, da je nova socialistična družba kraj sinteze (r)evolucionarnega spora, je jugoslovanska povojna družba doživela svojo antitezo v politični artikulaciji novih socialnih razlik, ta kritika pa je dosegla vrhunec junija 1968.

Pri tem je pomenljivo dvojje: prvič, junijska gibanja niso bila anti-sistemska, temveč nedvomno evolucionarna; drugič, kljub določenim podobnostim s socialdemokratskimi prizadevanji v kapitalističnih državah socialistični evolucionarni poskus ni zvedljiv na paradigmo, ki jo sodobna post-fundacionalna teorija obravnava s pomočjo pojma političnega. Jugoslovansko leto 1968 namreč ni poskušalo uradnega prizorišča (državne) politike, ki je operirala v horizontu ekonomskih, sistemskih in splošnih interesov, zamenjati z novim prizoriščem. To pa velja tudi za specifično umetniške artikulacije političnega nerazumevanja.

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