A Further Note on the Partisan Cultural Politics

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This short essay returns to the author's earlier article on the Partisan symbolic production and to Miklavž Komelj's response to it (both articles appear in this volume). Komelj argues that by rejecting a certain type of propagandism, Slovenian Partisan artists and ideologues successfully repudiated the instrumentalisation of art to protect authentic creativity. This, however, can already be read in mainstream Slovenian literary historiography. As such, Komelj's argument misses the fact that Slovenian Partisan art effectively solved the contradictory position of the various avant-garde groups as it retained their political project but not their rootedness in the depoliticised bourgeois culture. And the way the Partisan art broke out of this depoliticised culture was by not shying away from propagandism, which at the same time allowed it to realise the politics of the Slovenian strand of The New Objectivity.

SLOVENIAN PARTISAN ART, THE AVANT-GARDE, THE NEW OBJECTIVITY, YUGOSLAV SOCIALISM, BOŽIDAR JAKAC, MILE KLOPČIČ, NIKOLAJ PIRNAT

В статье коротко представлен предыдущий текст автора о символической продукции словенских партизан, и проанализирован отзыв Миклавжа Комеля на этот текст (оба текста вошли в настоящий сборник). По мнению Комеля, словенские партизанские художники и идеологи, отвергнув определённый тип пропагандизма, успешно отказались от идеологизации искусства и таким образом защитили подлинное творчество. Но эта точка зрения, будучи весьма конвенциональной, не учитывает того, что партизанские художники в Словении разрешили противоречие авангарда: они сохранили его политический проект, а не его укоренённость в деполитизованной буржуазной культуре. Это преодоление рамок деполитизованной культуры партизанам удалось именно благодаря смелому принятию пропангандизма, с помощью которого они в то же время осуществили и политику словенского варианта Новой вещественности.

СЛОВЕНСКОЕ ПАРТИЗАНСКОЕ ИСКУССТВО, АВАНГАРД, НОВАЯ ВЕЩЕСТВЕННОСТЬ, ЮГОСЛАВСКИЙ СОЦИАЛИЗМ, БОЖИДАР ЯКАЦ, МИЛЕ КЛОПЧИЧ, НИКОЛАЙ ПИРНАТ

Mainstream Slovenian literary historiography presents the debate about the doctrine of the so-called Partisan birch-tree, according to which even a well drawn birch-tree cannot be a work of art if there is no rifle leaning against it or if it is not pierced by a burst shot, as a successful repudiation of a vulgar instrumental attitude to the arts by the defenders of authentic artistic creativity, a victory of artistic freedom decisively backed by the political leadership of the Slovenian resistance movement.[1] The episode deserves to be re-examined since it indicates important political processes during the liberation struggle and socialist revolution in Yugoslavia, while also presenting an original and surprising solution to the contradiction of artistic avant-gardes. The general avant-garde project is to break out of the aesthetic closure and to intervene directly in historical processes. Artistic practices are not able to accomplish this project unless they encounter a political movement equally committed to transform history. At the point of this encounter, however, avant-garde practices reveal themselves caught within the bourgeois 'autonomous' sphere of culture with its specific elitist idiosyncrasies,[2] and masses appear to be trapped within the mechanisms of dominating ideologies. The encounter seems doomed to fail. And yet Yugoslav and in particular Slovenian Partisan artistic practices and cultural politics produced a solution to this contradiction.

Since its foundation in April 1941, the Liberation Front in Yugoslavia committed itself to constructing a 'state within the state',[3] a counter-state that would comprise not only military apparatuses but also juridico-political apparatuses (institutions of direct and indirect democracy, legislation, courts of law, monetary emission, etc.) and ideological apparatuses (radio and print media, elementary and secondary schools, scientific institutions, national theatre, etc.). Ideological effort (or 'cultural work', as it was called) integrated in a specific way the

1
See Glušič-Krisper and Kmecl; Smolej; Bernik and Dolgan. Dissenting views come mostly from the active participants in the liberation struggle. For a recapitulation, see Komelj; Komelj embraces the established view and refreshes it with a shot of contemporary French philosophy.

2
For the historical constitution of the so-called autonomous sphere of culture, and for its consequences for the present, see Breznik, 'La borsa' and Breznik, 'General Skepticism'.

3
The term was launched by Boris Kidrič, leader of the Slovenian resistance, in 1942. For a historical materialist analysis of the construction of the revolutionary state through armed liberation struggle, see Centrih.

sharp pre-war debates on the intellectual left (see Lasić) and re-directed them towards the common goal of national and social liberation, while preserving the specificities of various politico-ideological orientations within the movement.[4] In Slovenia, revolutionary cultural work broke the ideological monopoly of the Catholic Church (compromised by the collaboration of the high ecclesiastical hierarchy) and progressively achieved hegemony across popular masses.

The debate about the role of artistic practices within the liberation movement was intensified by a circular letter issued in January 1944 by the Propaganda Department of the Headquarters of the People's Liberation Army and Partisan Units of Slovenia (see Visočnik and Pavlinec). This invitation to contribute to an anthology of paintings contained the statement that was to galvanise a debate that until then had been dispersed and latent: 'We leave you complete freedom at the selection of the motive. … Excluded are still life and landscapes typical of the work of petit-bourgeois painters'. The letter was signed by the head of the visual propaganda section, Nikolaj Pirnat, who certainly was not an uneducated propagandist. The painter Božidar Jakac riposted with a linocut entitled *Still Life*, a bold expressionist rendition of a railway viaduct destroyed by the Partisans (who at that time had just destroyed the Otovec viaduct).

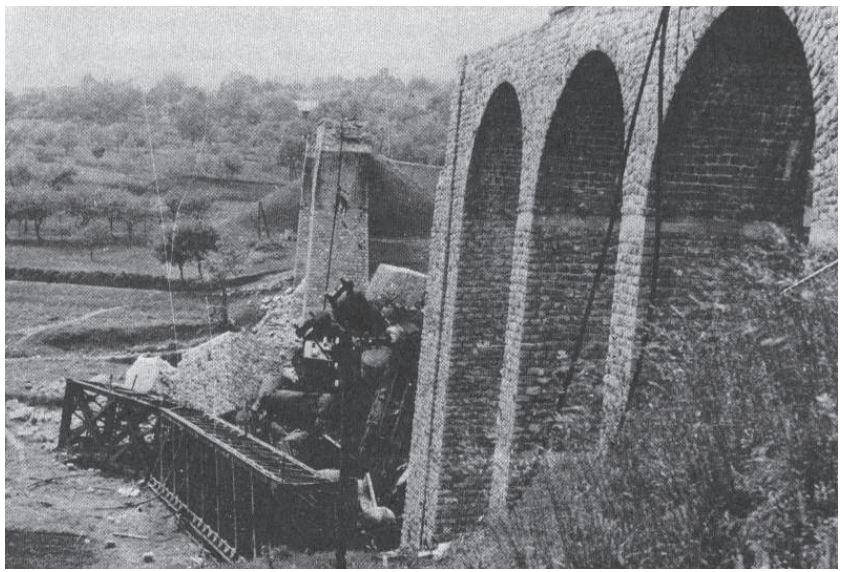
4

> *Liberation Front is not a coalition … [it is] a bloc of Com-Party with the middle strata and other patriotic elements, transforming itself into* a unified movement under the leadership of the Party.

This is what Edvard Kardelj, a member of the politbureau of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, reportedly said, on 17 January 1943, to Josip Broz—Tito, the supreme commander and general secretary of the Party; quoted in Centrih 183.

FIG. 1 →
Božidar Jakac,
Still Life, 1944

FIG. 2 →
The Otovec viaduct,
destroyed by the
Partisans on
14 September 1943



Jakac took the ideological form of a standardised mass visual product, reportage photography, as the material for his aesthetic elaboration. By then, this was a well-established modernist procedure; more importantly, reportage photography was also a form familiar to the target public of the engraving. Jakac established the meeting point of the modernist aesthetics and popular sensibility, and used it as the material of his own elaboration. Jakac's elaboration proceeded by three reversals: first, expressionist stylisation with apocalyptic suggestions[5] is a reversal of the Christian ideology (what is apocalypse for the enemy is victory for the Partisans); second, the reversal of the modernist fascination with technology affirms the superiority of the Partisan dedication and wit over sheer technical force;[6] and finally, the title reverses a 'bourgeois' genre—still life—into what is actually a double polemic: it is a revolutionary appropriation of the opponent's ideological form, and a comradery rebuttal of Pirnat's over-simplification in ideological struggle.

The procedure of reversing or, more generally, transforming and appropriating the established ideological forms of class oppression had actually been developed in Slovenian 'social literature'[7] of the 1930s. Progressive and revolutionary writers of the time refused the established and traditional literary forms and would have logically opted for avant-garde procedures. However, having rejected

5
The assimilation of revolution to apocalypse is a frequent motif in various strands of the avant-garde; in Slovenian poetry of the 1930s, it is often used in a reversed way: apocalypse, the end of the world of suffering and exploitation, is the beginning of the 'new world'. See also the ending of *Matere, ljubice, žene* (*Mothers, Lovers, Wives*), the 1939 poem by Ivo Brnčić ('Matere' 442):

> *But when the sky breaks apart / and when from human blood / a new day finally dawns / … / only then, with laughter and joy, / you mothers, lovers, wives, / … / only then tell us, the deadmen: / Rise now, our loved ones, and behold— / you have become the seed of the world.*
>
> *A ko se razkolje nebo / in ko iz človeške krvi / nov dan se nekoč zazori / … / takrat šele vse nasmejane / matere, ljubice, žene / … / takrat nam, mrličem, povejte: / Vstanite zdaj, ljubi, in glejte— / postali ste seme sveta.*

6
This is a motif formulated particularly by Matej Bor (7) in the poem *Kri v plamenih* (Blood in Flames), which in 1942 he included in his first anthology of resistance poetry:

> *[F]ists are stronger than steel and tanks and bombs / the spirit is ecrasite*
>
> *pesti so močnejše od jekla in tankov in bomb / duh je ekrazit*

7
'Social literature' and 'social art' were local variants of what was internationally generally called neue Sachlichkeit, *or, The New Objectivity.*

the consecrated forms of the dominating cultural ideology, they confronted the question of how to address the masses. The first answer was negative: certainly not with avant-garde extravagance. Blocked by this impossibility, they reverted to the material disseminated among the masses by the hegemonic ideology, especially to the material of the school canon (forms such as the sonnet, consecrated metric and rhyme systems, text-book 'pieces') and to the forms of popular devotion (funeral rites, apocalyptic visions, prayers). Contrary to what one might expect, parody and travesty[8] were only marginally used, and never in direct polemics against the material so elaborated. Rather, artists took hegemonic clichés in their materiality, as material fragments of speech seemingly devoid of meaning, and offered them to the popular audience they wanted to reach as familiar material support for radically innovative secondary elaboration. They used those fragments literally as the 'common ground' upon which, and with which, they constructed new textual formations.[9]

Breaking out of the ivory tower of bourgeois culture[10] entailed the appropriation of its most prominent fragments with the aim of building upon them a new construction whose formative principle was the explicit integration of its own social and historical determination into artistic practice.

For the present purpose, let us define aesthetic practice as a secondary elaboration of ideological material that itself is a more or less spontaneous refraction of social and historical constraints. In this light, practices of the 1930s 'social aesthetics' took popular and prevailing aesthetic forms, genres, motifs as the *ideological* material of their elaboration (a typically modernist procedure), while endeavouring to emancipate themselves from the social and historical determination of their procedures by articulating it as 'artistic tendency'.[11] Practition-

8
Parody and travesty are the simplest procedures of Bakhtinian 'double-voiced discourse' (Bakhtin 185–204); in the 1930s, 'social poets' used them mostly for direct polemical purposes, for instance, to attack the so-called abstract subjectivism of their expressionist contemporaries.

9
In theoretical production, this textual strategy was practiced by Soviet literary theorists Mikhail Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Vološinov. (See Močnik, 'East-west'.)

10
The 'modern', that is, bourgeois notion of culture (as an autonomous sphere) constitutively takes ideological formations as emancipated from their socio-historical conditions of production and existence. (See Breznik, 'La borsa'.)

11
The question of the 'tendency in art' was widely debated during the 1930s. (See Brnčić, 'Umetnost'.)

ers of 'social art' were perfectly aware that it was the adoption of a political tendency that distinguished them from ordinary avant-garde artists. What is more, by introducing the tendency, 'social artists' accomplished the avant-garde project that ordinary avant-gardes were unable to achieve. For it was the tendency as both recognition of and emancipation from social and historical determination that empowered 'social artists' to break out of the aesthetic closure of bourgeois culture and to intervene into historical processes themselves. But if the tendency opened the dimension of freedom, the material of aesthetic elaboration was a matter of constraint: the ideological material upon which 'social artists' worked was imposed upon them by ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state, namely the school and the church.

However, 'social artists' of the 1930s were not aware of this constraint. They entertained an empiricist notion of their own practice and believed that the 'objects' of their artistic elaboration were 'the breakdown of cultures and civilisations', 'everyday brutal tragedies', 'the ruin of millions of existences', 'the militant optimism of the classes who fight for new human relations' (Brnčić, 'Umetnost'). They believed that artistically strong treatment will make the tendency spring out of any relevant 'object'. Their ultimately bourgeois understanding of their own practice was imposed upon them by the limitation of their historical situation: only marginally connected to the illegal revolutionary political work, their practical existence was caught within the small world of literary journals and intellectual circles.

Progressive artists developed a satisfactory ideological *problématique* of tendency that enabled them to produce distinctive and powerful artefacts. However, they remained caught within an empiricist notion of the 'material'[12] and have not been able to reflect upon their treatment of hegemonic ideological forms. The Partisan practices retroactively

12
Marxist writer Ivo Brnčić ('Umetnost' 326) formulated the notion of tendency as follows:

> *[N]o problematic can be excluded from art. It is not the material which the artist has chosen that matters; what matters is justness of his attitudes, purity of his consciousness, consistence of his method. Such a method will know how to entice from any material irrefutable facts that will enounce a loud and positively tendentious discourse.*

explain this failure: pre-war 'social art' remained enclosed within the 'educated public', where its work on hegemonic ideological forms passed largely unnoticed and was understood as stylistic moderation, 'concreteness' and loyalty to tradition.[13] Artists themselves seem to have focused upon the (empiricist) problem of the 'object', and to have treated the problem of the specific material of aesthetic practice only marginally as a question of their dealing with tradition, without being aware of the class character of tradition. It was only with the armed resistance and revolution that the problem of addressing popular masses imposed itself with urgency. In a very short time, the Partisan artistic practices retraced the itinerary of the pre-war 'social art' and reached beyond its limitations.[14] They radicalised their attitude towards the material of their 'secondary elaboration' and, while occasionally still working on ideological forms of the school-apparatus,[15] they definitely turned towards 'popular' forms. And there were also two important supplementary causes that had over-determined the preference for traditional meters and 'popular' style: first, the lack of paper imposed oral dissemination of poetry, often forcing the authors to memorise their own creations ('This is why the Partisan poets had to rely on highly ordered rhythms, the bearers of memory.' [Javoršek 353]); and second, visual works were distributed as leaflets and posters, and poems were intended for singing.

Objective conditions of struggle constrained the artists to consider seriously the ideological forms which they would have simply repudiated as 'passéist kitsch' in their previous avant-garde years. Also, the older generation of 'social artists' now started to be concerned with the class character of the canon and 'tradition'.[16] The older generation nevertheless viewed with certain dismay the debate triggered by Pirnat's circular: it was one its representatives, the poet and translator

13
This misunderstanding can be inferred to from contemporaneous critical appraisals of 'social literature and art'.

14
Matej Bor is a case in point: he passed from free verse and Mayakovskian style to canonical verse and meter in a matter of months (between 1941–1942), and then on to 'popular' forms in less than a year.

15
Karel Destovnik—Kajuh, while having an extraordinary sense for 'popular' formulation, experimented, for instance, with the Mayakovskian 'stepladder' stanza (see Javoršek 1981: 352); in 1944, Levec published a poem in six elegant elegiac distichs and solved a century long debate about the transfer of classic quantitative metric schemes into Slovenian accentual-syllabic metrics.

16
It was this radicalisation that led Pirnat to reject still life and landscape as 'petit-bourgeois' genres.

Mile Klopčič, who coined the derogatory label 'the Partisan birch-tree'.[17] During the debate Klopčič proposed a reasoning that was the exact opposite of Goebbels's claim about *Volkstum* in the arts:[18] 'There are still people who say that art which is not people's art is no art at all.'[19] This was a way to suggest that 'popular' ideological forms are to be secondarily elaborated, quite as the canonical and traditional forms of the (bourgeois) school ideology need to be re-worked.

Political leadership finished the debate by proclaiming the standard petit-bourgeois view: 'The origin [of art] is the artist. The condition of his creation is his experience … sincere and deep experience.' (Bebler) This position was a stage within the processes that led, after the Liberation, to the composition of the ruling coalition uniting the political bureaucracy as the senior partner and the cultural bureaucracy as the junior partner. The practices of the two bureaucracies and their ideologies differed. Political bureaucracy intensively developed variants of communist ideology and passed from soviet orthodoxy to socialist self-management. And the cultural bureaucracy of ideological state-apparatuses nurtured various versions of nationalism and finally formulated cultural fascism (see Močnik, 'The Balkans'), which served as ideological justification for the destruction of socialist federation, mobilising masses for the post-Yugoslav wars. Compared to all this, the Partisan birch-tree was a far cry indeed.

17
Mile Klopčič was also the designated opponent of Pirnat in the two-night debate organised by the agitation and propaganda department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia in the autumn of 1944 at the Headquarters in Rog. After this debate, the doctrine of the Partisan birch-tree was officially abandoned. Its repudiation was explained by Aleš Bebler, one of the high commanders of the armed struggle. (See Klopčič and Bebler respectively.)

18
'It is not enough that art be only of good quality, it also has to grow from the people… only the art that draws on the whole *Volkstum* can finally be of quality.' (Goebbels to Furtwängler, 11 April 1933; quoted in Brenner.)

19
Mile Klopčič in a letter to the member of the politbureau Vida Tomšič; quoted in Mikuž 177.

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Povzetek

Ta krajši zapis se vrača k avtorjevemu starejšemu članku o partizanski simbolni produkciji in k daljšemu odzivu Miklavža Komelja na ta članek (oba članka sta v posodobljenih različicah izšla v tej reviji). V tem odzivu Komelj nereflektirano povzema institucionalizirano stališče povojnega slovenskega literarnega zgodovinopisja in to stališče zgolj posodablja v govorici sodobne estetske teorije. Po tem konvencionalnem stališču so se slovenske partizanke in partizani v polju umetnosti borili za svobodno umetniško ustvarjanje, pomembno zmago v tem boju pa so dosegli z argumentirano zavrnitvijo t. i. doktrine o partizanski brezi, po kateri niti podoba breze ne more biti umetnina, če breza ni prestreljena ali če ob njej ne sloni puška. Z zavrnitvijo te doktrine naj bi slovenski partizanski umetniki in politiki zavrnili instrumentalizacijo umetnosti in obranili avtentično umetniško ustvarjanje. Kot poudarja Komelj, naj bi bilo prav zato to dejanje izjemno relevantno tudi v današnjem času.

Toda medtem ko je bila doktrina partizanske breze res zavrnjena v imenu avtentičnega umetniškega ustvarjanja, se težko strinjamo, da je prav boj za avtenticizem v umetniški produkciji izjemno relevanten danes, ko je umetnost ravno politična umetnost, ki svojo kritiko usmerja ne le v politično sfero, temveč tudi in najprej v avtenticistični kič, ki prevladuje v njeni lastni, estetski sferi. Še več, z današnjega post-socialističnega gledišča lahko rečemo, da je doktrino partizanske breze in mobilizacijo umetnosti za revolucionarno propagando nasploh ustavilo vodstvo slovenskega narodnoosvobodilnega boja, in sicer na pobudo bivših socialnorealističnih in podobnih umetnikov med partizani, prav ti skupini pa sta si po vojni razdelili oblast kot nadrejena politična in podrejena kulturniška birokracija.

In nasprotno, sama doktrina je ponudila rešitev protislovij ne le socialnega realizma kot slovenske verzije t. i. nove stvarnosti, temveč tudi historičnih avantgard. Doktrina je namreč predpostavljala uporabo modernih postopkov, kakršen je akuzmatizem prestreljene breze, na ljudskem gradivu, znanem iz šolskega kanona in verskih ritualov. S tem je doktrina omogočila izhod iz protislovja socialnega realizma, ki je sicer moderne postopke že v desetletju in pol pred 2. svetovno vojno uporabljal na širokim ljudskim množicam znanem simbolnem gradivu, a tega ni počel v prid politični mobilizaciji ljudskih množic, pač pa v imenu abstraktne politike v tradiciji t. i. kulturnega pesimizma. Z uporabo modernih umetniških postopkov na ljudskem simbolnem gradivu pa je doktrina partizanske breze pokazala tudi na izhod iz protislovja avantgard, ki so sicer že v času pred nastopom socialnega realizma imele radikalen politični projekt, ki je bistveno presegal abstraktno apokaliptičnost kulturnega pesimizma, a kot izhajajoče iz t. i. avtonomne sfere buržoazne kulture tega političnega projekta niso mogle uresničiti brez naslombe na revolucionarno ljudsko gibanje, kakršno je imela na voljo šele partizanska simbolna produkcija.

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