Research on the Avant-garde(s).
Case Study: Zenitism and the Central European Contacts

Abstract: New and seminal approaches to the historical avant-garde have begun on the global level in the 1960s, continued and expanded particularly in the 1970s, with different, sometimes even radically opposite interpretations. The determination, meaning and importance of the avant-garde were very much the product of the great divides in world society at the time. Therefore, not all historical material was available for research, and important social context and political conditions could not be openly discussed and clearly emphasized everywhere. The end of the 20th century introduced new interests, new orientations and a general rejection of major leftist ideas, which the avant-garde had historically belonged to. Therefore it is not surprising that the decline of research in avant-garde movements did not bring about a comprehensive reading of various cultural, particularly leftist phenomena from the first half of the 20th century.

The case of the Yugoslav revue Zenit (Zagreb, Belgrade 1921–1926) and the entire movement of Zenitism had a particular social and cultural position. Completely marginalized and almost forgotten after World War II, it was only identified with the controversial personality of its founder Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971), considered in post-war Yugoslavia to be a nationalist and a conservative. Comparative studies of similar European avant-garde revues, their histories, objectives, poetics, manifestations and practices were leading in early 1980s towards a new, broader and much deeper reading of the Zenit revue and its significance for the Yugoslav cultural milieu of the 1920s. With various types of activities, a large number of collaborators and written manifestos with particular ideological determination, it became obvious that Zenit was not an isolated occurrence, but was very much connected to almost all progressive periodicals, intellectuals, writers and artists all over the world. It had a great humanistic, however utopian mission ahead: modernization of the entire society through the social role of international culture and art.

1 The paper was presented at the Day of Hungarian Science Literature Across Frontiers - Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute for Literary Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, November 21, 2018, Budapest.
Key words: Yugoslav avant-garde, Zenitism, Central European Avant-garde(s), international cultural links in the 1920s

It is common knowledge that the study of new avant-garde phenomena and movements of the early 20th century has never been straightforward or simple just as there has been no clear definition of avant-gardes: what is their chronological and formal framework; whether the term itself is adequate or what possible interpretations open up in the process. Different approaches, often opposing theories and contradictory views thus entwine to this day even among the foremost experts and researchers the world over. The widest accepted view is that of Peter Burger (1974) who claimed that historical avant-gardes focused their criticism on the prevailing situation in arts, aesthetics and society; that their ideas were progressive and free of national sentiment denying the autonomy of artistic and cultural institutions at the time of an advanced bourgeois society. The avant-garde is seen as the foundation of the new 20th century art; in its essences the syncretism of all creative potentials experimenting with new creative bases of importance for all subsequent paths in their development. Its political and sociological dimension may not be ignored either. The Russian avant-garde, for instance, was seriously studied by local researchers but for well-known ideological and political reasons. The relevant books were first published by experts in Europe and the United States of America after World War II. A somewhat better situation was in Hungary (Miklós Szabolscsi and Julija Szabo were among the first), Poland and Czechoslovakia to be joined later by their fellow researchers in Romania and Bulgaria. In Yugoslavia, too, the situation depended largely on individual views, a limited number of researchers, but also on political circumstances which, as if through a lens, refracted the attitude to avant-gardes. It is for this reason that my paper bears on a case-study of the magazine Zenit and Zenitism, an avant-garde movement in Yugoslavia no matter how this term (Yugoslavia) might have become questionable and a subject to dispute today when Yugoslavia exists no longer.

Let us remind ourselves: the current celebration of the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I in 1918 necessarily sheds light on the historical and political events which changed the map of Europe as well as its ideological, social and even cultural thought, and conduct in the broadest of terms. In the aftermath of that war four empires fell apart and numerous states came into being: some shrank, some swelled or united like the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (SCS) which in 1929 was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; after World War II it will change its name according to political ideas and circumstances: from the Federal People’s and Socialist to Federal Republic, until one day, in February 2003, that name, together with the state as a whole, became part of history as a result of bloody fratricidal wars in the 1990s.
Looking at its philosophical, theoretical stand and disposition, *Zenit*, with its subtitle *International Review for Arts and Culture* (subsequently „for new art“), an expressionist, Pan-Slavic, one might say Nietzschean magazine, had an ambitious program and set out to justify its name symbolically and practically. It was launched in Zagreb by the then young actor, poet and critic, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy, Ljubomir Micić (1895-1971), previously forcibly drafted into the Austrian armed forces in 1914 from which he saved himself by, in his own words, „faking insanity.“ This statement entailed serious consequences as his numerous critics and people who thought differently would misuse his testimony.

Defined as „an abstract meta-cosmic expressionism,“ *Zenit*, from its very first programmatic text in its first issue of February 1921, disseminated the ideas of pacifism – markedly anti-war mood and South Slavic brotherhood and cooperation the world over, especially among the young generations, primarily in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. It advocated agonistically absolute creative freedom and at the same time, the introduction of social themes and new forms of socially useful and responsible creativity. It propounded revolutionary views under the clear influence of the ideas of the October Revolution – Lenin’s, Lunacharsky’s and Trotsky’s (their works can be found in the early *Zenit* issues). Due to its feistiness and progressive conceptions it was rated as one of the most influential European magazines of the time. Likewise, with its openly critical views, resolute resistance to the relapses of traditionally organised institutions, and values of the bourgeois society, the magazine uncompromisingly, vociferously and sarcastically settled the score with many issues of the then local politics, culture and arts and thereby with some prominent and undisputable arbiters such as the writer Miroslav Krleža, Stjepan Radić, a representative of the Croatian part of the government, or Bogdan Popović, professor at the University in Belgrade. These challenges and vehement reactions will affect the whole life of Ljubomir Micić and the fate of Zenitism in the broadest of terms: flight from Zagreb to Belgrade in 1923 and then from Belgrade to Paris in 1926. Making due allowances, this is still the case!

After, a markedly expressionist key amalgams begin to emerge in Zenitism (Micić calls them synthesis and reincarnation) of primarily futurists’ exultation over progress, movement, dynamism, machinism and freedom of expression. At the same time we see an almost anarchic rebellion conducted by means of a „poetic Dadaist-constructivist technique“ (Vučković, 1986: 33). In *Zenit* we find radical philosophical and programmatic texts, manifestoes, poems, criticisms, multi-genre and inter-media creations and visual works related to expressionism, futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Neoplasticism, Purism, and abstraction. There are frequent

---

2 Zagreb, February 1921 – Belgrade, December 1926; in all 43 issues.
contributes on topical production, social and political issues. Zenit is interested in architecture, music, theatre, applied arts, including fashion, and new technological and scientific achievements – railway, airplanes, electricity, radio, telegraph, Nikola Tesla in particular. Micić’s attitude to film, a new art, was specific: „By incorporating the spirit of film in his own creative opus, he translated into life one of the key avant-garde postulates: obliteration of the boundaries between elite and popular culture, the institutions of art and practical life. Even more than that, he saw Zenitism as a film of a ‘literary movement and spiritual revolution’“ (Metlić, 2018),5 as he called a published chronicle of his activities.

For propaganda purposes and in its own defence, Zenit uses documents: different artefacts, posters, leaflets, letters, photographs, court records and newspaper articles. Polemics, puns and slogans are a part of an impressive and compelling strategy supported by ingenious typographical solutions in the magazine and other Zenitist publications. In 1926, however, one senses the fatigue: élan fades away, the number of associates dwindles down; Zenitism becomes a part of a historical movement rather than a view towards the future.

Zenit international cooperation is impressive: the exchange of publications, texts, letters, ideas, reproduction plates, photographs and even works of art, was incredibly intensive especially if one bears in mind the means of communication of the time. Across Europe and particularly Paris and Berlin as European centres where the majority of creative individuals lived and worked and where many new ideas were born, Zenit established contact from Baltic countries to South America and even Japan and the United States of America. The original concept of Zenit program: to be national and international, presumed equitable participation of not only young but also highly prominent creative minds supporting progressive Europe and the world as a whole regardless of class, generational, national, stylistic, linguistic and other differences. Zenit thus insists on the importance of both the creative effort in the Balkans, but also that of others all over Europe, particularly in the Slavic and geographically close environment: from Hungary to Czechoslovakia to Poland, from Bulgaria to Romania to Russia. Although he published works of Russian prosaists and poets (Yesenin, Mayakovski, Blok, Khlebnikov, Parnakh et al.) from the very beginning, i.e. as of 1922, Micić and his wife Anushka also maintained contact with representatives of the so-called Russian Berlin: Ilya Ehrenburg and Lazar El Lissitzky whom he had met in Berlin. On that occasion Micić also met many other painters, printmakers, sculptors, philosophers, critics, poetry and prose writers, and actors. The peak of Zenit publishing policy was the so-called Ruska sveska (Russian Notebook, Nos. 17-18, October-November 1922), with a special cover by El Lissitzky done in the spirit of his prouns. For the first time

in that double issue there was talk among the Yugoslav public about different aspects of the new Russian art: theatre, music, poetry, street performances, architecture with an emphasis on the social role of culture, and creativity in the broadest sense of the word. Zenit will apply this aspect largely at its next stage at theoretical and practical levels, particularly in contact with personalities and ideas related to Bauhaus. Micić engages in correspondence, publishes works, exchanges reproductions, buys or receives magazines and works by Vassily Kandinsky, László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, Theo van Doesburg, Hannes Meyer and others; he organises exhibitions, delivers lectures, holds soirées and opens his collection to the public.

Contacts established in Vienna between Hungarian Aktivists and Zenitists date back to the spring of 1921 when the exchange of texts and introduction of Zenit began in Ma (No.7). It carried Micić’s poem 13 and a reproduction of Tatlin’s Sketch for the Monument to the Third International, indicating that it had been taken over from Zenit. In return, in Zenit No.6 Boško Tokin introduces ideas of Ma and Kassak’s Poem 8 (Zenit, No. 22, 1923). We read about Ma activities again in Nos. 11 and 14, 1922. That same year the cover page of Zenit No. 15 featured Kassak’s linotype, and his fundamental text The Architecture of Picture appeared in No.19/20. Zenit offers a great deal of important information about Hungarian books and reviews while the broad concept of both magazines with their socially committed views created enough room for shared ideas, maybe because both understood their status: the emigrant one among avant-gardists in Hungary and a highly marginalised one of Zenitists in Yugoslavia. Zenit writes very favourably about the Hungarian movement and singles out Endre Ady as a “titan” of European poetry expressing highly effectively the tragedy of his people and the struggle of the modern man. Zenit writes also about Mihalyi Odö, Sándor Barta, Kohän, Janos Macza, Lajos Kudlák, and emphasizes in particular the importance of Lajos Kassák with whom Micić exchanged correspondence for many years even when both of them were living in Paris, but at that time the magazine Zenit belonged already in the past. Three Hungarian artists: Lajos Tihanyi, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Ladislav Medgyes displayed their work at the First Zenit Exhibition in 1924.

In addition to Ma, several other Hungarian magazines followed Zenit activities: Akasztott Ember identified it with Dadaism holding that it was influenced by bourgeois culture clichés, and Magyar irás, which published Zenitist works by Micić, Poljanski, Dundek and Živanović, pointed out at the humanistic principles of the Yugoslav movement and its unrelenting struggle for the new man and new culture. In its analysis

6 Micić has bought two works by Kandinsky for 5 dollars each, as stated in a letter preserved in Micić’s bequest, now in the National Museum, Belgrade.
7 Three works by Moholy-Nagy were reproduced in Zenit, Nos. 19/20, 36 and 41, and the sculpture by Joszef Czaky in No. 9.
8 E. Ady’s graphic portrait, done by L. Tihanyi, was in Zenit Collection, now in the National Museum in Belgrade.
of Zenitism Napkelet\(^9\) notes the differences distinguishing it from other new movements and, since it presents opposing views, relates it to activism and even anarchism.

The cooperation with Hungarian activists in Vojvodina in 1922 took many forms; it was also vulnerable because of their closeness to Dadaism which Zenit rejected. Hírlap came out in Subotica and Út in Novi Sad.\(^{10}\) That same year János Mester suggested – unsuccessfully – that the three magazines: Ma, Zenit and Út should come up with a synthesis of Hungarian Aktivists, Zenitism and avant-garde Vojvodina Hungarians.

Particularly intensive was the cooperation with Czech artists and magazines. One might begin by saying that Dragan Aleksić’s Yugoslav Dadaism was „born“ in Prague in 1921 when as a student of philosophy and Slavonic studies he sent to Zenit\(^{11}\) his manifestoes, poems, plays, dada essays on Kurt Schwitters (whom he had met in Prague) and Vladimir Tatlin. In 1921 in Prague, Branko Ve Poljanski and Aleksić participated in Revolučna Scena and founded Zenit Art Club as Karel Teige reported in newspapers Čas,\(^{12}\) Červen and Prager Presse.\(^{13}\) When Teige drew a sign of equality between Zenitism and Dadaism, Micić responded in his Zenitist radio film Šimi na groblju Latinske četvrti (Šimion the Latin Quarter Graveyard)\(^{14}\) asking sarcastically whether Czech artists still imitated French Cubists.

Jaroslav Seifert translated for Červen Yvan Goll’s poem *Paris brennt* published previously in Zenit, and in Rovnost\(^{15}\) wrote that Zenit championed pacifism, spiritual revolution and anthropocentrism. František Goetz (*Host*, No.1922/23) also wrote about Zenit as following in the steps of Marinetti and Apollinaire with elements of expressionism and social tendencies.

In its issues Nos. 6, 7, 8 and 9 in 1921 Zenit featured reproductions of young Czech artists around the leftist Veraikon, and accompanied them with a short text. The artists were members of the future Devĕtsil: K. Teige,\(^{16}\) J. Havliček, A. Hoffmeister, B. Piskač, A. Wachsmann and L. Süss.

Zenit carries poems from Jaroslav Seifert collection *Město v slzách* (*A Place in Tears*), Jiři Voskovec’s intriguingly set 23ºº HOD, L. Dymeš, A. Soukop and K.

---

9 The author is Janos Macza, Nos. 13-24, 1922.
10 Micić’s Manifestoes Zenitizmus and Druga provala Vavara (The second Burglary by Barbarians) were published in 1923.
11 As of No. 3, 1921. They were separated when Aleksić broke away and published the magazines Yugo-Dada and Dada-Jazz; in response, Poljanski issued his Dada-Jok and Dada-Express.
12 September 10, 1921; Čas wrote in a very positive way about Zenit on various occasions; the review Červen, No. 12, 1921, underlines Zenit’s resistance against Europe, its international character and the influence of German expressionism.
13 On August 22, 1923 writes about Zenit, No.21, and about Branko Ve Poljanski’s and Marijan Mikac’s books.
14 Zenit, No. 12, 1922.
15 November 29, 1921.
16 Zenit, No. 11, 1922 reproduced Teige’s linoleum with Paris view.
Vanek. *Pásma* in Brno (Nos. 1, 4, 10, 1924/1925) also features comments on the *Zenit* revolutionary character and Jo Klek’s „eclectic and romantic” works and the triple issue of *Wohnungs-Kultur*, also in Brno, translates Micić’s text *Antisoziale Kunst muss vernichtet warden* (Nos. 6-8, 1924/1925). In 1927, among others, almanac *Fronta* translated into Czech Micić’s *Manifest barbarima duha i misli na svim kontinentima* (Manifesto to Barbarians of Spirit and Thought on All Continents) and printed in French Poljanski’s poem *Sing-sing nous montons Himalaya*. Micić sustains lively correspondence, partly preserved, with Teige, Artuš Černik, V oskovec, and Josef Čapek (February 2, 1924) who writes that he failed to organise the participation of Czech artists in *Zenit’s* international exhibition of new art in Belgrade in April 1924 for financial reasons. *Most, Česke Slovo, Narodni Listy, Tribuna, Rudé Právo, Prager Tagblatt, and Právo Lidu* wrote also about *Zenit*.

Financial difficulties also prevented Polish artists from joining the exhibition. In his letter written on the header of *Zwrotnica* magazine in Krakow, Tadeusz Peiper says that Polish artists have other commitments and lack funds necessary to transport their works to Belgrade, but that he nonetheless looks forward to a fruitful cooperation between Polish and Yugoslav magazines.

Micić was evidently familiar with avant-garde works by Polish artists but, since the situation was quite different as they cultivated authentic, radical constructivist orientation, any closer rapprochement with heterogeneous *Zenit* was not very likely. Nevertheless *Zenit* followed the developments around Warsaw’s *Blok*, Krakow’s *Zwrotnica*, *Nowey Sztuki Almanach*, presented books by Julian Przyboś, Jan Brzekowski, Jan Kurek, and Peiper, and carried his letter of congratulations in French on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of *Zenit* (No. 38, 1926). In it, Peiper says that he hates zenith just as he hates mountains because they draw us away from earthly blood, but that he loves Ljubomir Micić’s *Zenit*: „It is never above aeroplane routes, capillary vessels of the Earth’s transportation system. Long live *Zenit*.“ Notwithstanding ideological differences Polish *Blok* (Nos. 6-7, 1924) published in Polish Micić’s programmatic text *Zenitozofija ili energetika stvaralačkog zenitizma* (*Zenitosophy or the Energy of Creative Zenitism*).

*Zenit* establishes cooperation with the Romanian avant-garde as well: it first carries Alfred Margul Sperber’s poem *July 1919* evoking from Paris the fate of Europe, and then cooperates the best with *Contimporanul*, a Bucharest magazine drawing on the tradition of Tristan Tzara’s and Ion Vine’s early magazine *Simbolul*. It felt close to technical civilisation, constructivism, and abstraction, as well as to Dadaism with its slogan of „destroying art because of its moral prostitution.“ It published a text on Micić’s *Reči u prostoru* (*Words in Space*). Like *Zenit*, in December 1924 *Contimpuranul* organised an international exhibition presenting the Zenitist Jo Klek. *Punct. Revistà de artà constructivistà* in Bucharest carried a part of Micić’s manifesto *Zenitozofija ili*
energetika stvaralačkog zenitizma (from Zenit, Nos. 26-33, 1924) and Integral, a review for the synthesis of modern art, carried Micić’s poem Varvarska kajgana (Barbaric Scrambled Eggs).  

The cooperation with neighbouring Bulgaria was established through Geo Milev, a resident of Berlin for many years. In early 1924 this writer, socially committed poet, polemician, critic and collector, launched the journal Пламъкъ (Flame) in Sofia and at a later stage carried Micić’s introduction to Lunacharsky’s text Proletkult (September-October 1924) where Proletkult was interpreted as an affirmation of Zenitism and the culture of South Slavs. There are also reviews of Branko Ve Poljanski’s poem Panika pod suncem (Panic under the Sun) and the six-fold issue of Zenit (Nos. 26-33). In its turn, Zenit carried Geo Milev’s protest against the dictatorial regime of Aleksandar Cankov and his September, the poem which provoked Milev’s assassination. The surviving letters of Milev to Micić refer to the then political, social and cultural situation in Bulgaria reflected in his magazine. There is also information about the work of young, progressive artists for Zenit exhibition in 1924 featuring Mirčo Kačulev, Ana Balsamadjieva and Ivan Boyadjiev; their works demonstrate their interest in ethnic motifs in a modern key. According to art historian Ruža Marinska, the Zenit exhibition was the first international event with important participants which included Bulgarian artists (Marinska, 2005).  

Ljubomir Micić, internationalist and anti-colonialist, spiritual Bolshevik, leftist and then nationalist, rightist and anti-communist, genius and paranoiac, a Serb from Croatia who first enthused about Yugoslavism and then attacked both Croatian and Serbian mentality, is bigoted, intolerant, and controversial: he published a poem by his brother Branko Ve Poljanski entitled Laso Materi Božjoj (A Lasso to the Mother of God) and then denied it; he accepted aid from the Serb parish in Trieste. His is a singular personality not only in terms of ingenuity, ideas, persistence and entrepreneurial spirit, forceful polemic inclination and organisational ability, but also because his behaviour and actions were marked by disturbing antinomies, ambiguities, metaphorical forms of expression and absurd humour which the police, the judiciary, media and petit bourgeois public had neither patience nor sympathy for. Quite the reverse: some Micić’s books and Zenit issues were seized, burnt, prohibited as blasphemous and he was ridiculed, repressed, branded, hated and eventually persecuted. Even though his magazine and the entire movement breathed in new European, transnational, creative energy in our – Croat, Serb, Yugoslav – culture, Micić, at the same time, vigorously opposed this Europe as we see in his collection of poems entitled Anti-Europe in 1926 where he calls it „a stinking shark,” „disgusting whore,” „croaking hyena“ and „inflated toad.“ Rather than quick Europeanisation that the young Yugoslav society, exhausted by the Balkan Wars and World War I, aspired to, Micić offered the slogan „Balkanisation of Europe“ with the metaphorical  

17 We find the information about that in Zenit, No. 39, 1926.
figure of Barbarogenius: a fresh, untainted, pure, uncompromising and strong spirit with its roots in the Dinara, i.e. Balkan, mountains. This is, of course, akin to Mayakovsky’s idea about the predominance of the mystical East over the rational West and his slogan Moscow versus Paris. In Europe, introducing a cultural monopole, Micić sees „cruel humanism,“ „insatiable Western capitalism and imperialism“ and „stinking decomposition of the mankind.“ And yet, instead of a court trial and prison in Belgrade for the „incitement to revolution“ and „advocacy of Marxism,“ Micić opted for the life of an émigré in Paris for a whole decade, published there in French his post-Zenitist novels and tried, unsuccessfully, to re-launch Zenit and open an art gallery in the Parisian suburb of Meudon to show works which his wife Anushka, translator and secretary of Zenit had brought from Yugoslavia.

One of the antinomies was his publishing attempt with Srbijanstvo, a literary-political journal, with Manifest srbijanstva (Manifesto of Serbianhood), the only issue of which came out in May 1940 after he returned to his homeland. At that moment under the major pressure of internal frictions and the Axis powers Yugoslavia changed its politics. Micić and Anushka, who was a Jew, were in fear of Nazism and persecution. The voices of vulnerability and fear were no longer interpreted as bolshevism but as „chauvinistic ideas and instigation of national hatred,“ and the Ministry of the Interior banned the magazine. Even after World War II Micić will be described as a rightist and nationalist and denied membership in the Association of Writers, which meant total excommunication from public life, impossibility to publish and lack of the means of livelihood until his death. It was a kind of damnatio memoriae the chief cause of which was, it would seem, the intolerance of Belgrade surrealists in Marko Ristić’s circle toward Zenit, Zenitism and Micić himself ever since the 1920s when the magazine was published; in many ways they were rivals with kindred public appearances and ideas, leftist orientation and international support, but the surrealists were an organised group and Micić, all on his own, wrote about the surrealists as „literary snobs whose brains have been devoured by Freud.“ After World War II and a brief period of socialist realism the surrealists, even though Trotskyists before the war, but now close to and needed by the communist government, together with Miroslav Krleža, an old Micić’s enemy, determined the cultural policy in Yugoslavia. They held responsible political and social posts; they formed the public opinion and at their discretion left traces from the past and testimonies for the future. There was no room for Zenitism there. Until the end of his life Micić was isolated

18 Text by Dr M. R. Rasinov (probably Lj. Micić himself), Zenitism through the Prism of Marxism, Zenit, No. 43, December 1926.
19 It is curious that Polish art and literature historians and theorists, such as, e.g. J. Wierzbicki, A. E. Naumow, and A. Turowsky point out at Micić’s nationalism which did not exist in early Zenitism and evolved only later due to hardships he suffered in Croatia just as much as in Serbia.
and destitute; his life was practically like that of a beggar: almost starving, despised, unrecognised, well-nigh forgotten and represented invariably as a social weirdo. On several occasions he was even charged and tried for misdemeanour. Stating "I do not exist for the public, the public does not exist for me," he received almost no one, but never stopped writing and sending his critical texts to various addresses in the country and abroad. They referred to the everyday life and reminiscences of the glorious past of *Zenit* in the world. He died in a retreat for the old and without documents; only two young friends looked after him.

It is this ambivalence of Micić’s character and his work in general that generates some uncertainty or unease, appears undesirable and, according to some, even dangerous. This finds its reflection in Zenitism itself: ephemeral things often prevail over the visionary ideas and views which Micić held and expressed in his works and the entire programme activity of the magazine *Zenit*.

Due to the absence of documentation and a fuller insight into diverse Zenitist activities, the first post-war modest presentations of this Yugoslav avant-garde movement did not go beyond expressionist literature as based on texts in the magazine and rare Zenitist publications. On the other hand, Zenitism was identified only with Dadaism in some general overviews, for instance in Michel Sanouillet, Hans Richter or Branimir Donat.

It is noteworthy that Michel Seuphor was the first to include *Zenit* in his overview of abstract painting in 1957 and a decade later, in 1967, Miodrag B. Protić included him in the exhibition *The Third Decade – Constructive Painting* (1967) in Belgrade’s Museum of Modern Art, offering as an example some ideas and the visual identity of the magazine. During the preparations for the exhibition, as a curator of the Museum, I communicated with the founder of Zenitism and ‘met’ him, first at the Belgrade’s New Cemetery, next to the monument to his wife Anushka, and then intensively in his small flat in the city centre where I had the opportunity to see some avant-garde artworks and guessed that a great deal of what was collected in the 1920s did survive. Nothing was known about it so that shortly after Micić’s death, I could ask the authorities in the municipality in which he had lived, to preserve every bit of paper he left behind and to look for his possible heirs.

After the abovementioned exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art the interest for the international place of Zenitism gradually grew owing, by and large, to texts by the art historian Zoran Markuš who had also been visiting Micić. However, it was only in 1981, ten years after Micić’s demise, when none of the heirs had been found, that the complete legacy was recorded and distributed between the National Museum (all works reproduced here are from the *Zenit* collection) and the National Library of Serbia keeping Micić’s literary work and all his books. Two years later, in February

---

1983, an exhibition entitled *Zenit and the Avant-Garde of the Twenties* was put on show. With Vida Golubović, the co-author of the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue I endeavoured to demonstrate, with the help of a rich artistic collection and documentary material from both parts of Micić’s legacy, the complexity, the many-layered nature and evolution of *Zenit* and with it Zenitism and its principal ideas. The exhibition was accompanied by various side events varying from day to day: an international gathering of prominent avant-garde scholars; discussions about the notion and history of avant-garde movements; the place of Zenitism in the family of movements of the Twenties; a concert of avant-garde music featuring works by Josip Slavenski, a *Zenit* collaborator and pupil of Béla Bartók; *Barbarogenius*, a theatre production by Nenad Ilić; *the Balkan Explosion*, a documentary radio drama broadcast by Radio Belgrade’s Channel I; projections of avant-garde films and films about avant-garde; a special television show following the whole process of the organisation of the exhibition designed by the Yugoslav architect Ranko Novak, the most prominent Yugoslav architect of the time; the catalogue featuring all works in the collection. *Zenit* newspaper and a reprint of *Russian Notebooks* were published; Saturday was set aside for experts guiding through the exhibition and discussing it with the public. The reaction of both media and the public at large was huge: some, especially young visitors, admitted that it was the first time they had set their foot in the National Museum.

And then: a new attack on now defunct Micić by none other than the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Serbia in charge of culture: in February 1983 Radivoj Cvjetičanin writing in *Borba*, the organ of the Socialist Alliance of Yugoslavia, accused the National Museum of nationalism because it had „dedicated its exhibition to Micić.“ The persecution party was joined by the mayor of Belgrade, well-known architect and university professor Bogdan Bogdanović. All favourable texts about the exhibition became unfavourable overnight. The exhibition could be banished. Passions subsided, however, and we learned that these irrational attacks came from the surrealist Marko Ristić and his close associate Radomir Konstantinović who as early as 1969 drew a sign of equality between Micić and *Barbarogenius*, the „darkest genius of the Serbian culture“ (Konstantinović, 1969: 20-21). Those were the deathbed throes of the communist bureaucracy after Tito’s death.

In spite of all this, after Belgrade the exhibition moved to Zagreb and then, be it in its entirety or only in part, set on its international „tour“: *Zenit* was presented in the National Gallery in Budapest, Lodz and Krakow, in Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, Italy, Paris, Washington, Tel Aviv, Vienna, Moscow, Japan, and Frankfurt; a part of the *Zenit* documentation was recently included in the exhibition *The Years of Disarray* in the museum in Olomouc, in Krakow, Bratislava etc.

Although the interest the world showed for historical avant-gardes peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, a slight delay in the study of Zenitism in relation to other avant-
garde phenomena and movements in Europe was made up for now owing to master and doctoral theses, monographs, exhibitions, analyses in catalogues and professional journals, as well as dailies and periodicals. Let me list some researchers from the region in addition to those I have mentioned already: Vidosava-Vida Golubović, Ješa Denegri, Gojko Tešić, Miško Šuvaković, Želimir Koščević, Zvonko Maković, Jadranka Vinterhalter, Peter Krečič, Janez Vrečko, Aleš Erjavec, Lev Kreft, Jasmina Ćubrilo, Dijana Metlić, Vesna Kruljac, Petar Prelog, Lada Grdan etc.

Fortunate circumstances combined together in the beginning of the new millennium when the horrors of the wars in the Nineties, the ten-year long isolation due to the United Nations sanctions and Milošević’s regime came to their end. Three important institutions were headed then by individuals who realised that for our – and European culture – it was important to publish a reprint of all Zenit issues alongside a monograph which Vida Golubović and I have been working on for 40 years without ever changing our view of Zenitism or making any political or social concessions. In 2008 the funds provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia allowed to round off this major effort in cooperation with the Institute for Literature and Arts, the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade and Prosvjeta, the Serb Cultural Society in Zagreb (the National Museum which keeps the entire artistic legacy showed no interest to participate in the publication). The set of the reprint and the monograph have won several awards, proclaimed the „publishing project of the year“; Zenit was digitalised and included in the World Digital Library and Europalia. A new surge of interest followed.

Today, Zenitism is represented in permanent displays of the Museum of Modern Art and the National Museum in Belgrade and one of its chief protagonists, Josip Seissel (alias Jo Josif Klek) is on display in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. A special place is accorded to Avgust Černigoj and Edvard Stepančič, highly respected Slovenian constructivists with whom Micić cooperated intensively. Private collectors, who cannot obtain original works, are collecting still available documentation and there are even numerous forgeries! A memorial plaque has been mounted on the house where Micić lived; persecution has ceded place to his inclusion in walks around literary Belgrade. After a highly regarded film Splav Meduza (The Medusa Raft) by Branko Vučićević and Karpo Godina about the ups and downs of the Yugoslav avant-garde, Micićev kofer (Micić’s Suitcase), a semi-documentary film followed; Dah Theatre has produced an experimental drama about Zenit and Aleksandar Dabić is making a new film inspired by Micić’s life and his authentic enthusiasm. American designer Paula Scher, Fia Artistic Group, graphic designers Mirko Ilić and Slavomir Stojanović, magazine for architecture Kamenzind with Ana Đorđević-Petrović and Leila Peackock are all inspired by Zenit typographic solutions for their remakes. There is even a new magazine called Zenit which, however, has no avant-garde pretensions. Vladimir
Veljašević has published a book without words – *Slobodan pad* (Free Fall), a visual novel called a „pictogram guide“ through tragic situations in the life of Ljubomir Micić; for the past few years the suburban municipality of Obrenovac has been organising a festival called *Oslobadanje (Liberation)* which popularises the avant-garde ideas of *Zenit* in different ways, including jazz music; and *Ozone*, an art gallery in Belgrade, held an exhibition made by architect and designer Breda Brzjak and artist Saša Pančić three years ago visualising the magazine *Zenit* in space. Anonymous young people post on internet texts and reproductions of their favourite Zenitist issues: Micić and *Zenit* live on their lives but blows from left and right do not stop. When the former President of Serbia Boris Tadić presented the President of Croatia Ivo Josipović with a *Zenit* reprint a few years ago, the Zagreb press proclaimed it a „diplomatic scandal of the first order“, quoting what Micić had said about the Croatian culture a century ago.

In less than three years the hundredth anniversary of *Zenit* will be marked. Today it is considered a significant avant-garde movement integrated in the European history of modernism of the 20th century. With a group of young experts – enthusiasts, private gallery owners and publishers – we are preparing different events and publications suited to the new age, new public, new interests, new social and economic circumstances and new technological possibilities. If we are joined by state institutions: museums, libraries, archives, we shall consider it a great and, as things stand at present, an unexpected success.

REFERENCES:

Istraživanje avangarde.

Studija slučaja: Zenitizam i centralnoevropski kontakti

**Apstrakt:** Novi i podsticajni pristupi istorijskoj avangardi počeli su na globalnom nivou šezdesetih godina prošlog veka, a nastavili se i proširili naročito sedamdesetih, sa različitim, ponekad i radikalno suprotnim interpretacijama. Odlučnost, znanje i značaj avangarde bili su u velikoj meri proizvod ogromnih društvenih podela u svetu u to vreme. Stoga, za istraživanje nije bila dostupna celokupna istorijska građa, a važan društveni kontekst i političke prilike nisu se mogle jasno istaknuti, niti se o njima moglo svugdeotvoreno diskutovati. Kraj 20. veka doneo je nova interesovanja, nove orijentacije i opšte odbacivanje glavnih levičarskih ideja, kojima je avangarda istorijski pripadala. Otud ne čudi što opadanje u istraživanju avangardnih pokreta nije dovelo do sveobuhvatnog tumačenja različitih kulturnih, naročito levičarskih fenomena iz prve polovine 20. veka.


**Ključne reči:** jugoslovenska avangarda, Zenit, zenitizam, centralnoevropska avangarda, međunarodne kulturne veze dvadesetih godina

---