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**CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON ROMANIAN HISTORICAL
AVANT-GARDE: ARTISTIC MODERNIZATION AND
POLITICIZATION IN ROMANIAN AVANT-GARDE
PAINTING**

ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS

Key words: *historical avant-garde, artistic modernization, cultural synchronization, modernism, traditionalism, „aestheticization” of politics, „politicization” of aesthetics, politicization, Romanian avant-garde painting, „tutelary” avant-garde, „dependent” avant-garde, avant-garde artistic language, dadaism, expressionism, cubism, cubo-futurism, futurism, integralism, surrealism, constructivism, totalitarian political regimes, socialist realism, socialist-realist iconography, proletarian culture, figurative art, the socialist-realist program of „artistic re-education”, ideological manipulation of art, reductionism.*

The main objective of the doctoral thesis *Current Perspectives on Romanian Historical Avant-garde: Artistic Modernization and Politicization in Romanian Avant-garde Painting* is to closely analyze the aesthetic features characterizing the Romanian avant-garde painting, its political implications, as well as the relationship between these two particular traits.

In as far as the references on this topic are concerned, we have noticed two major deficiencies which constituted the main reasons that determined us to pursue this basic theoretical research. These two major theoretical deficits are easily identified in the contemporary debates regarding the modernization and politicization processes of the Romanian historical avant-garde. One deficit, which is both quantitative and qualitative in nature, is represented at the national level, while the other has a rather qualitative nature and is reflected, at international level, in the insubstantiality of the research dedicated to the status of Romanian avant-garde in the central-east European context. In this respect, we particularly have in mind a lack of useful converging points of view that might help us outline the interference of the historical avant-garde with socialist realism. The novelty of our approach resides in the very attempt to surpass the internal and external limits of the previously mentioned investigations, by choosing a balanced interpretation that would help us understand the aesthetic and ideological intersection between Romanian historical avant-garde and Romanian socialist realism.

The comparative approach to this tense interference between the two controversial paradigms was prompted by the idea that a parallel analysis favors their reciprocal highlighting and also gives us the opportunity to review and discuss the unique ideological and aesthetic features of Romanian socialist realism, which, unlike our historical avant-

garde, has not been thoroughly examined, in spite of the fact that both movements shared, for a while, the same ideological and artistic conditions. In consequence, the current stage in the study of this aesthetic and ideological dialectic has determined us to conduct a contrastive research on the Romanian avant-garde and on socialist realism, with special emphasis on the idea of transition from aesthetically „total” art to ideologically „total” art. Therefore, we have pointed out the need for a comparative approach to the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the socialist realism, underlining the emphasis that the aesthetic ideology of the avant-garde places on its political implications, as well as the emphasis that political ideology places on its aesthetic implications; in the latter case, this process – accompanied by the ideology of progress, by the mythology of „the new man”, by the new messianism or by the utopian ideal of a better, egalitarian future for mankind, with art bearing the strong marks of social activism – led, as we know, to the emergence of socialist realism. On the other hand, considering the problematic historical encounter between the avant-garde and the socialist realism, the contrastive approach to the aesthetic avatars and to the politicizations of art that characterize this aesthetic-ideological confrontation presented with the benefit of finding further clarifications with regard to the implementation of socialist realism in the national artistic milieu that was characterized by its reluctance to the radical desiderata of the historical avant-garde.

With regard to the steps taken throughout the chapters of the hereby thesis, in order to fulfill the above mentioned objective, the three parts of the paper present with an internal order, starting, in the first chapter, with a review of some general perspectives on the artistic evolution and modernization of Romanian historical avant-garde painting; the second chapter analyzes the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the totalitarian political regimes from Western and Eastern Europe, while the last chapter presents the particular features of the politicizations of Romanian avant-garde painting during the socialist realism era.

In as far as the methodology of the research is concerned, we chose a comparative approach, starting from the premise that from its very beginning, in the first part of the 20th century, the artistic avant-garde was subject to numerous debates regarding the clear limits that would allow us to ascribe the formation and the approach of this complex phenomenon to a specific field – be it the aesthetic, philosophical, social-cultural or the political field. Consequently, in the attempt to attain the main objective stated in our thesis, we resorted to a specific analysis, consistent with the particular nature of this basic theoretical research.

We placed our investigative approach at a confluence point of art history and art criticism, philosophy of art and sociology of art.

The first chapter of the thesis was conceived in relation to the complementary aspects discussed in each subchapter: identifying some general points of reference for a chronology of the evolution and of the synchronization of the Romanian avant-garde with European artistic modernism and highlighting the hybrid nature of Romanian avant-garde.

Before taking a closer look at the current perspectives on Romanian historical avant-garde painting, the first subchapter begins with a short chronological presentation of the Romanian avant-garde, starting with the pre-avant-garde moment and moving on to the two Romanian avant-garde waves – the first, with Dada, Futurist, Expressionist, Constructivist and Surrealist Experimentalism, between 1924-1933, and the second, represented by the Surrealist Group from the 40s. Following a review of the most significant and already consecrated or „classical” perspectives on Romanian historical avant-garde, together with the presentation of the three major moments in Romanian avant-garde, while expressing our critical stance with regard to the current theoretical approaches on the matter in question, we tried to identify the significant points of reference that would enable us to outline a chronology of the evolution and of the synchronization of the historical avant-garde painting with European artistic modernism, from the perspective of the national artistic context that favored the artistic modernization of Romanian painting during the pre-war and interwar period.

In order to discuss the process of modernization that was brought about and supported by the emergence and by the synchronization of Romanian historical avant-garde painting with the European artistic modernism, we approached four chronological reference points dating from 1909-1920, as case studies. After setting these two reference points, we reached two important conclusions. The first conclusion is related to the fact that the futurist iconography reflecting the need for a change, visually „incorporating” the aspiration for renewal of Romanian modern art – which can be traced in representations of the auroral sensitivity, of the return to origins, of the rebirth or emergence of a new world, as well as in the reflection of urban life synchronized with the new rhythms of the modern era – mirrored the innovative artistic efforts that culminated with the cultural synchronizations of Romanian historical avant-garde with the European avant-garde. The second conclusion brings forth the particularity of Romanian modernism, namely the fact that it was a vector for the aesthetic radicalism of the avant-gardes, generating, at the same

time, the specific imagery of passeist utopias, including those belonging to the socialist realism iconography.

In order to point out the particular elements that individualize the synchronization of the Romanian avant-garde painting with European avant-garde, we brought up for discussion the term „synchronization”, because for Romanian historical avant-garde it meant, on the one hand, creating – in Romanian cultural space – the conditions allowing it to evolve at the same pace with the main European artistic movements, and on the other hand, striving to rapidly compress the aesthetic experiences that had favored the emergence of these movements. Consequently, we noted that during the first three decades of the 20th century, the attempts to reach synchrony with the main European artistic movements combined with the efforts to renew Romanian art and favored both the emergence of Romanian historical avant-garde, and the modernization of national art, following the emergence and evolution of our avant-garde.

While trying to define the specific nature of this process of synchronization, we also noted some particular features that individualize the synchronization of Romanian avant-garde movements with the European avant-garde movements – Expressionism, Cubism, Cubo-futurism, Futurism (a rare case of double synchronization, chronological and programmatic), Integralism (synthesis of all historical avant-garde movements up to that time), Surrealism, Neo-dadaism and Constructivism. In relation to Constructivism, we conducted a case study dedicated to the significance attached to the reception – at that time – of the first great international exhibition of the *Contimporanul* group in 1924, the peak moment in Romanian avant-garde painting. When revealed, the specific features of this process allowed us to outline the hybrid quality of Romanian avant-garde, that resides in the interference between plastic and aesthetic features belonging to a tempered native modernism and features belonging to radical Western modernism. In this respect, we presented some of the hybrid aspects of Romanian avant-garde, providing examples of fusions among various artistic movements and eventually, we traced these fusions and hybridization in works of important artists belonging to our historical avant-garde, such as M.H. Maxy, M. Iancu, H. Mattis-Teutsch, V. Brauner and C. Michăilescu.

At the end of the first chapter, we outlined the main features of Romanian modern art created in the first half of the 20th century, from a contemporary perspective: cohabitation and reciprocal hybridization of avant-garde and national traditionalism, different artistic approaches to industrial urbanism, the stylistic or aesthetic compromise, the efforts to synchronize with the cultural changes of the time and aestheticism. We have also

mentioned the opposition between the traditional national art and the historical avant-garde art that heralded some of the major tensions between the historical avant-garde and the socialist realism ideology.

We started Chapter II with several conceptual and terminological clarifications regarding the relationship between modernity, modernism and the avant-garde, which allowed us to pursue our analytical approach to the relationship between the historical avant-garde art and the totalitarian political regimes, as well as to the contribution of modern art and avant-garde art to the evolution of art over time. First, we briefly reviewed the defining elements of modernity – loss of the descriptive function of modern art, the propensity to change and, above all, the tendency to synchronize historically and aesthetically with the development of civilization and of intellectual history. In view of all the above, we noticed the fact that the historical avant-garde, which shares with modernity the propensity to synchronize and change, and with modernism mostly the perpetual need to change, had radicalized this common momentum for change.

The dismissal of various commonly accepted roles of art took place not only at the aesthetic level- rejection and dismissal of the historical avant-garde – but also as a result of the intervention of totalitarian regimes – the Nazi or fascist regimes in the Western world and the communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc. Both right-wing and left-wing totalitarian regimes used formalist abstraction and especially the illustrative realistic styles as means of social criticism or as political propaganda instruments. In light of this idea, we analyzed the relationship between the historical avant-garde art and the totalitarian political regimes, and this aspect represents the main topic that we approached in the second chapter. First, we presented the three requirements (of referential, performative and manipulative nature) imposed to the avant-garde by the totalitarian political power, and then we identified the main obstacles hindering the use of the avant-garde art for political purposes. The first major impediment was the fact that the artistic avant-garde and the political radicalism (be it right or left) did not follow the same direction. The second impediment was represented by the fact that totalitarian regimes were populist, while the avant-gardes addressed the cultural elites.

In the second part of the chapter we provided antithetical examples of the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the totalitarian political regimes in former Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany, and then, we pursued a contrastive analysis of this topic, with reference to the situations in central and eastern Europe, mainly in Hungary and Romania. Our examples outlined some similarities, but they revealed mostly

dissimilarities between the actions of the totalitarian political regimes in Western Europe (Germany and Italy) and those from Eastern Europe (USSR, Hungary, Romania, The Czech Republic or Yugoslavia). In as far as the dissimilarities are concerned, they were revealed in a different set of oppositions that gradually extended from the aesthetic level to the geo-political level of the opposition between the Western and the Eastern world. Further on, over the post-war decades, the two emerging poles representing modernism and realism were transformed into absolute aesthetic and political imperatives. In consequence, over these decades, the Eastern Bloc grew to be identified with the art of socialist realism that opposed the unlimited freedom of the avant-garde, which culminated in the West with pictorial abstraction and with the cult of modernist formal novelty.

In our analysis of the distinctive features of Romanian historical avant-garde, we first acknowledged the fact that the Romanian avant-garde art could not develop and perpetuate during the socialist realism years – as politically „dependent”, respectively „engaged” or even guided avant-garde – mainly because of the specificity of the modernization process in Romania, that constantly struggled to restore the western features of Romanian art, to „westernize” it. On the other hand, we should mention the fact that, during the interwar period, traditionalism and the avant-garde coexisted and remodeled each other, in spite of their different or even opposite artistic views. This proves us that Romanian avant-garde had already undergone a process of adaptation to a certain historical context before facing the restrictions of the communist regime. In line with the openness toward the aesthetic and political ideas altogether, which is particularly noticeable with Romanian avant-garde artists, we end the second chapter with several remarks that are meant to outline the importance of the ideological opposition between the tendencies to „aestheticize politics” and the tendencies to „politicize aesthetics”, which characterized the confrontation between the historical avant-garde and the socialist realism. In accordance with current theories on the relationship between art and life, that are viewed as „incorporated” in the aesthetic and respectively in the political field, we identified the *aesthetic* and the *fragmentariness* with the historical avant-garde, and the *political* and the *totalness* with the Nazi and the communist ideology. These observations led us to the topics discussed in the last chapter of the thesis.

Chapter III analyzes the intricate and contradictory aspects regarding the tense relationship between the political and the artistic field, reflected in the politicizations and in the aesthetic avatars of Romanian avant-garde painting within the ideological context of socialist realism. The first section of the last chapter highlights the opposition between

ideology and the avant-garde, with reference to the antinomial relation between the radicalism of the avant-garde ideal of a „total art” and the ideological radicalism of the „ideal” of a politically instrumentalized art, coordinated by totalitarian regimes, and respectively to the antithesis „*tutelary*” avant-garde (historical avant-garde - a movement founded and organized according to its own aesthetic principles) and „*dependent*” avant-garde (politically „directed” or controlled avant-garde); this contrastive relation represents the dominant standpoint for the whole discussion about the politicization of Romanian avant-garde painting from the socialist realism era.

This approach is in keeping with the idea of a so-called *instability* that we had previously identified in as far as the concept of avant-garde is concerned, considering the dialectic of the two functions – aesthetic and political – that were successively or simultaneously incorporated by the avant-garde in its evolution. Over the second half of the 19th century, the nature of social activism of the avant-garde artists changed, shifting from the idea of artistic autonomy towards political activism as such. As this direction gradually became more significant during the first half of the 20th century, it highlighted the disagreement between the technical radicalism of the avant-garde style and the liberal social views of the artists, as well as the efforts made by the artistic avant-garde to synchronize with political ideologies of socialist origin. In our view, the artistic paradigm of the socially engaged avant-garde was understood and placed at the intersection or at the limit of reciprocal remodeling of the two perspectives or alternatives that we have identified. In fact, one focal point in our approach to the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the totalitarian regimes was the identification of a pattern of gradual contamination which occurred both in a co-evolutionary manner, and as a result of the propaganda requirements that imposed artistic formulas that were characteristic to the socialist realism tenet. In Romania, as in other countries from the „Eastern Bloc”, this type of *social avant-garde* renounced any aestheticist and autonomous prerogatives – through direct and brutal coercion – or it slowly and inevitably glided towards the socialist realism paradigm.

The theory according to which the idea of an avant-garde relies essentially in the co-articulation of artistic and political formulas led us to further question the avant-garde movement from the perspective of the political implication of its representatives; we conducted this analysis in the second part of the last chapter. Both the subchapter presenting antithetically the political implications of the traditionalist artistic movements and of the „combative artistic movements”, and the subchapter reviewing the ideology of

artistic militancy – with the examples of Marcel Iancu, Hans Mattis-Teutsch and Victor Brauner – were consistent with our analysis from the second section of this last chapter. The logical succession in the structure of this section first required the presentation of a theoretical argument based on the current studies conducted on the aesthetic-ideological dialectic that we have approached (from the ideologically inflected aesthetics to an aesthetically inflected ideology), followed by the presentation of several points of view regarding the particular relationship between the Romanian historical avant-garde and socialist realism, and then, the review of the effects that the „artistic method” of socialist realism had on artistic creation.

Our comments on the concept of politicization, followed by those referring to the contrastive pair – aesthetic principles and ideological purposes – revealed the opposition between „tutelary” avant-garde and politically „dependent” avant-garde.

In our review on the stages of politicization of Romanian art during 1944-1950, two major ideas stood out. The first one regards the „tutelary” avant-garde and refers to the avant-garde ruled by its own aesthetic principles and political views; the second refers to the „dependent” avant-garde, which, antithetically, marks the start of socialist realism in works belonging to artists from the historical avant-garde. During this transitional period, the themes chosen by artists like M.H. Maxy, Jules Perahim and Hans Mattis-Teutsch for their artworks were influenced by the Proletkultist ideology, but they kept elements belonging to the artistic language of the avant-garde.

While presenting the ideological model of the „invented traditions”, we highlighted the systematic attempts to remodel collective consciousness by including, in complex manipulative systems, propagandistic visual representations. Invariance, repetitiveness and clarity of the message were identified as the main features of this ideological model. We chose to present this specific Proletkultist model used to manipulate the visual propaganda media, because it is relevant for the contrastive relationship between the aesthetic values and the ideological idolatry that dominated during the political dogmatism period in Romania. Consequently, we identified the typological traits characterizing the communist propaganda iconography and we managed to reveal the major role played by the manipulative model of „invented traditions”.

In order to exemplify the strong commitment of the communist regime to change individuals through political education and ideological control, we presented the three forms of ideological manipulation of art that were imposed in the form of the „artistic reeducation program” which characterized the socialist realism, as well as the survival

strategies used by the Romanian historical avant-garde artists; we particularly pointed out the fact that the historical experience, Orthodox education and the collective memory had been the three main factors that determined the conformism, passiveness and dissimulation which defined the Romanian intellectuals' reaction to the ideological pressure of this political indoctrination program.

With regard to the politicization of art after The Second World War, we noted the fact that the establishment of the totalitarian regime, after 1944, interrupted the natural development of modernism in Romania, to such extent that neo-constructivism, a movement originating in the avant-garde, was less represented in Romania, compared to other central-east European countries during the 50s and over the first decades of the 60s. With neo-constructivism deprived of the utopian ideology of the 20s and of its revolutionary rhetoric, which were now employed in the discourse meant to legitimize the totalitarian regime, „engaged art”, previously promoted by a part of the artistic avant-garde between the World Wars, was forced to evolve as a politically „directed” art; the so-called „figurative realism” of socialist realism gradually substituted the so-called „modernist realism” and the principles of figurative art steadily replaced the avant-garde art principles.

In order to clarify the distinction between „modernist realism” and „figurative realism” and to explain both the internal (aesthetic) reasons and the external (political) reasons for this opposition, we first questioned the expression and the artistic function of revolutionary art, as well as the concept of „proletarian culture”. In as far as the internal reasons of the opposition are concerned, while emphasizing the importance of this concept we managed to point out the dichotomy modernist realism-figurative realism, by dissociating the attributes of Western avant-garde – as modernist art – from the characteristics of the socialist realism –as expression of the proletarian culture; the latter imposed the artistic view according to which the entire content of the artwork had to directly represent its subject, to be able to bring real social issues to the public attention and also to express the collective revolutionary ethos. In reference to the external reasons that dissociated „modernist realism” from „figurative realism”, we reviewed the international context of the 50s, considerably marked by the tensions of the cold war that divided both the political „camps” and the artistic „fields” characterizing the Western capitalist world, on one hand, and those characterizing the sovietic type of communist world, on the other hand. For these external reasons, of a political nature, the socialist realism needed to represent the socialist values of the East European Bloc, in opposition to the „bourgeois avant-garde” of the capitalist bloc.

In order to illustrate the reasons that would justify the attraction for the communist ideology and at the same time the effects of the Proletkultist pressure on Romanian avant-garde, we focused on the cases Jules Perahim and M.H. Maxy, and then we continued this discussion focusing on the dilemmatic situation of the Romanian avant-garde artists. For them, the status of the artist became dramatically torn between conviction and constraint. In order to describe more accurately the extent and nature of these constraints, we defined, in broad lines, the „program” of the socialist realism, the ways of ideologically manipulating art and the resorts of the tensions between the communist political leaders on one hand, and the artists belonging to the historical avant-garde and the intellectuals, on the other hand.

We considered the intersection between Romanian historical avant-garde and socialist realism to be illustrative for the meaning attached to the concept of politicization, which, in this case, pointed to an important intrusion of the social-political field into the field of aesthetics. This insertion process started at the beginning of the 1930s and it culminated with the establishment of the socialist realism paradigm. The representatives of the avant-garde were crucially influenced by a left-wing, predominantly Marxist ideology. In the beginning, they engaged in supporting this ideology, both in the artistic field and in social life. Disillusioned with the repercussions of totalitarianism in the field of social-political life, as well as with the results of the socialist realism method in art, some of the Romanian avant-garde artists moved away from the communist ideology and from the artistic style it had imposed.

In conclusion, the last chapter provided a detailed analysis of the politicizations and of the aesthetic avatars of the Romanian avant-garde in the cultural and ideological context of socialist realism and proved the fact that the aesthetics of the historical avant-garde had ideological implications, while socialist realism was characterized by an ideology whose implications were, to a certain degree, of aesthetic nature as well. These partial overlaps of an aesthetic and ideological nature created for a while, both for the avant-garde artists and for the promoters of socialist realism, the illusion of complete ideological similarity, at least with regard to the social significance of the artwork.

We have questioned the „artistic method” of socialist realism, in order to point out the particular nature of the process in which aesthetic revolution intertwined with the social revolution, whose main effect was the reorientation of the aesthetic principles towards ideological purposes. With regard to this method, we have identified its basic principles that guided the aesthetic evaluation: „ideological adhesion” (its militant character was

opposing abstract or neutral formalism) and the „national or popular spirit” (its large addressability was opposing both cosmopolitanism and „reactionary” bourgeois nationalism). The apparent similarity of the social projects led to the transformation of „tutelary” avant-garde into „dependent” avant-garde and, at the same time, to the emergence of socialist realism as an ideological synthesis, opposed to all historical avant-garde movements. For this reason, we interpreted socialist realism as a reorientation of most aesthetic principles and artistic methods of the historical avant-garde, which eventually turned against themselves and against avant-garde itself. Under these circumstances, we concluded that, instead of the virtual futurism (aesthetically solved in art), real futurism emerged (together with the socialist realism paradigm) and that the latter was politically solved through assimilation into social life. In this context, the very implicit aesthetics of cubism was gradually replaced by the explicit logic of prolet-cubism, by means of substituting the hermetic symbolic representation of reality, typical to Western cubism, with an explanatory presentation of reality – fairly typical to the socialist realism formula that was common in the central-eastern European area.

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