The Networks of East-Central European Avant-Gardes
– Summary –

Key-words: avant-garde, East-Central Europe, literary cultures, literary geography, geoliterary space, travelling theory, World Literature, imagined communities, interliterary communities, cultural production, avant-garde networks, network theory, Digital Humanities, peripheral cultures, modernism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, constructivism, poetism, integralism, activism, formism

Summary:

My doctoral thesis addresses the idea that, rather than comparing the different materializations of East-Central European literature with Western literature, one should turn one's attention to the neighboring literatures. The historical avant-gardes of East-Central Europe can provide a much more transparent analysis of the interliterary relationships that were built in the first half of the twentieth century for a number of reasons: their inherent internationality, their peripheral condition in regard to both their national literary space and the international cultural scene and their attempts to consolidate a transnational network through their publications.

The geoliterary space selected for my investigation merits a short discussion. The spatial turn in literary historiography has led to a series of debates concerning the resemantization and recontextualization of the literary identities of the so-called national literatures, all the while stimulating a widening of the geographic horizon in explaining transnational literary phenomena. By proposing a shift towards spatiality as a governing factor in reading literature, transnational literary historiographies such as Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004-2010), Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir's *Literary Cultures of Latin America* (2004) or Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín Gonzales and César Domingues' *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* (2010) go against more traditional endeavors that sought to illustrate literature as a homogenous and organic phenomenon. The consequences of spatial approaches to literature are multiple: transnational histories treat literary phenomena within the framework of regional and geopolitical determinism, focusing

on common aspects between two or more literatures; they strive to legitimize historiographical narratives that were otherwise overlooked, or, in other cases, "mistreated" (as in the case of postcolonial readings of literatures from Eastern Europe); finally, the spatial turn seeks to overturn historically established hegemonic relations such as Center-Margin, East-West or North South by democratizing the peripheries in a way that illustrates their own specificity.

However, spatialized historiographical projects are not without their vulnerabilities, especially concerning the fact that the spatial component seems to be more of a pretext for comparing a number of national literatures that share the same geocultural space than an in-depth exploration of spatiality in these literatures. The studies gathered in the four volumes of *The History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, for instance, use the implicit nature of geographical location in order to build on a "vertical" history of the literary cultures in question, thus continuing a line of inquiry that is more traditional than groundbreaking. The dynamics between center and periphery is not challenged, but rather it is used as a base model for the analysis of the different literary phenomena surveyed. This is why I believe two questions needed to be answered in order to evaluate the functionality of spatial approaches to literature: 1. How can we attempt a "horizontal" history of spatially determined literatures? and 2. To what extent can this horizontal perspective challenge or even eliminate the idea of East-Central European alterity?

In order to further calibrate my investigation, I then explored two concepts that emerged in very different cultural spaces, but share some similarities. The first belongs to Benedict Anderson and has become, ever since its emergence in the 70s, a go-to concept for analyzing literary phenomena at different scales: *imagined communities*. Employed, in its first phase of development, as a conceptual model for the discussion of nations in general and nationalism in particular, Anderson's concept has been used extensively even in the analysis of narrower communities, most of them intra-literary. The second concept belongs to Dionýz Ďurišin, who, in his works on "the theory of interliterary process", developed a theoretical framework for *interliterary communities* as a model for analyzing the relationship between two or more cultures. The principles behind Ďurišin's concept are: 1. geographical proximity; 2. cultural affinity and 3. shared events and experiences (cultural and political). In order to explain the mechanisms underpinning the interliterary process, Ďurišin

establishes two extremities. On one end, he places the "national literary relationships" as ground zero for the evaluation of what he calls "the general laws of literary relationships", and on the other the "interliterary relationships". According to the principles determined by the Slovakian comparatist, interliterary communities that are closer to the ground zero of national literary relationship are the ones consisting of literatures that form together an ethnically related identitarian whole (such as Czech and Slovak or Russian and Ukrainian literatures), while interliterary communities that are closer to the other extremity are the ones consisting of literatures that share the same geographical space.

The specific conditions underpinning the interliterary relations established between the avant-gardes of East-Central Europe can be identified, first and foremost, through the transnational mechanisms that were developed in synchronicity with the main European avant-garde currents. The base models of circulation established by Futurism, Dada and Surrealism determined not only the poetics of these peripheral avant-gardes, but also their model of dissemination and proliferation. This is why I believe that, rather than speaking of a single type of avant-garde "internationalism", one should start referring to multiple "internationalisms", each of them based on different models of international circulation, only partially intersecting with each other. The centrality of these internationalisms is ever transient, and while obtaining a catalytic role in the shaping of other, marginal avant-gardes, these latter phenomena were, in a few instances, the ones responsible with the survival of the European avant-garde. The most evident example can be found in the 1940s, when the global capital of modernity moved from Paris to New York, and peripheral mobility was the sole European continuator of the avant-garde during World War II.

Following the developments in the field of transnational studies and World Literature, my study further addressed the idea that, rather than analyzing the relationships between East-Central European literatures and Western literatures in a way that enforces an inherent power structure between the two elements, the interaction between the neighboring literatures of the former should be emphasized. The historical avant-garde represents an important case study in this respect. The presence of Jewish writers, the existence of several catalyzing cultural centers (France, Germany), and the occurrences of spatial displacements of authors from within these avant-gardes, as well as ideological affinities are factors that have consolidated a form of interliterary communication between the East-Central European

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avant-gardes that could provide a very strong case study in regard to early transnational dialogues between marginal national literatures. Drawing from what Tötösy de Zepetnek called "inbetween peripherality" and the most recent discussions revolving around the inherent internationality of the avant-garde movements, my thesis sought to adapt recent theories to the aforementioned geoliterary space and motivate why the avant-gardes belonging to this space are critical to the explanation of early transnational communications in the modern European culture.

Last but not least, the idea of a certain transnational *ethos* of these avant-gardes (that can be traced through synthesizing both the local particularities of these literatures and the interliterary strategies that consolidated the existence of a true network of the European avant-garde) is also promising. One could argue that a transnational history of the East-Central European avant-garde can also be regarded as an eloquent history of interliterary relationships between European cultures of the twentieth century. Of course, the so-called "transnational turn" cannot be considered a homogenous process in discussing these literatures. Aspects that concern the fluidity of borders and the multiple interferences, both local and otherwise, have to be taken into consideration. For example, the leftist ideology of the Romanian avant-garde does not come by direct contact with Russia, but by means of cultural ricochet *via* the West.

Before discussing any type of interliterary network between the avant-gardes of East-Central Europe, a preliminary account on the conditions of forging transnational relations between them needed to be made. This is because the so-called peripheral avant-gardes needed to have a sort of base model for interliterary networks to be made, and by virtue of the first major European currents, these base models were provided by different types of international models of circulation, as they can be observed when analyzing Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism from this perspective. It is essential to take into consideration the fact that centrality (seen as a primary force of cultural determination) was not the only decisive factor in avant-garde networking. Cultural centers such as Paris or Berlin, while being catalytic in the development of transnational artistic networks, also underwent a series of changes that made their centrality rather transient (the most obvious case is Paris after 1940, when the global capital of modernism shifted to New York). In this context, it was peripheral mobility that assured the survival of the avant-gardes during the Second World War.

The functional differences between some concepts that pertain to what traditional critical discourses have used in order to analyze the historical avant-garde had to be made. I began with the "obvious" feature of the avant-garde: internationality. For a long time put in opposition to the idea of national literature or art (such as the case of the "European" label used to counter nationalist frameworks), the internationality of the avant-garde was an emblem of modernity that gathered all the traits of the current. Cross-border initiatives such as publishing in multilingual periodicals or participating at international exhibitions and conferences were seen as endeavors that transcended national artistic aspirations and attracted criticism from conservative and nationalist intellectuals. This inherent internationality, did not, however, contradict the inclusion of national or nationalist frameworks. Another feature associated with the historical avant-garde (and in close relation to internationality) is cosmopolitanism. As with the case of internationality, cosmopolitanism, as a privileged mode of individual cross-border mobility in the period, did not interfere with national(ist) values. While there are cases where cosmopolitanism was a stance taken in opposition to extreme nationalist conceptions (the case of avant-garde artists of Jewish origin is exemplary in this respect), avant-garde cosmopolitanism in general was seen as an emblem of modernity, and a cultural imperative in itself towards a European art.

These features which I have discussed pointed towards a better understanding of the different functions of internationality and internationalism. While international or cosmopolitan, the avant-garde is not exclusively internationalist, as it oftentimes enters in quite a harmonious coexistence with nationalism (Italian Futurism, Serbian Zenitism, Flemish Expressionism etc.). Similarly, transnationality explains and brings together internationality and cosmopolitanism without it necessarily including (or treating in exclusive terms) internationalism as a pre-given omnipresent feature of the historical avant-garde.

I attempted to chart the various mechanisms specific to the aforementioned internationalisms in order to make clear the different "base models" for transnational networking in East-Central European avant-gardes. In its most representative form, Futurism followed a center-periphery model of communication and diffusion of manifestos, while also giving way to different "national" futurisms (Polish and Russian futurism being the most well-known). The *Manifesto of Futurism*, published in 1909, marked the emergence of the

literary manifesto as a self-conscious genre, that was later imported in virtually all the national avant-gardes. Alongside the futurist manifesto, a new-found consciousness on the integration of art through militant practice was born. F.T. Marinetti's unique model for the dissemination of his avant-garde manifesto also made clear, if involuntarily, another phenomenon: while Paris was the indisputable cultural center of the world, the peripheries made for the best venues for militant avant-garde programmes. A different stance was taken with Dada. In an evident move against the ideologically contaminated Futurism, Dada opted for an a-centric, non-national (and anti-national) type of internationalism, founded on a capitalist logic of networking (with the existence of a Berlin Dada office dubbed as "world headquarters", for instance), with journals and publications produced all over the world, and even with a "traveling" journal, Francis Picabia's *391* (with issues reporting Dada activities in Barcelona, Geneva, Paris, New York, and Zürich). While this ephemeral form of internationalism also meant that national manifestations of Dada were impossible to materialize, both formal aspects of the current and traveling mechanisms were ultimately employed by East-Central European literatures in their own versions of avant-garde. Finally, Surrealism, while latent in its manifestations throughout East-Central Europe (with the notable exception of Yugoslavia, Surrealism only emerged in the 1930s), had a very strong peripheral diffusion through the adjacent "national" Surrealisms: the Bucharest Surrealist Group, the Budapest Group (called "The European School"), Skupina Ra (the Czech version of Surrealism), as well as alternative Surrealist groups founded in the semi-peripheries (Surréalisme Révolutionnaire, the CoBrA Group). Moving away from the destructive, nihilistic pattern of Dada, the Surrealist internationalism was also the most devoted to the idea of socialist revolution.

Intra-national dynamics were also an integral part of my thesis. By revisiting a series of conventional interpretations made in the autochthonous critical discourse, I further explored the various ways in which the Romanian avant-garde approached themes and motifs belonging to rurality, be it from an anti-mimetic stance, against the grain of Romanian traditionalist aesthetics emerging in the first two decades of the twentieth century or from an ethnographical standpoint, in the manner discussed by James Clifford in his analysis of "ethnographic Surrealism" (as an activity engaged in rearranging reality against the general cultural consensus). With aspects such as identitarian self-validation in the international

avant-garde scene on one hand, and the negotiation of internal literary heritage in the process of nation building on the other, I then analyzed the strategies employed by a series of influential Romanian avant-garde writers in their process of mediating the local and the global in their respective poetic projects. Such negotiations within the historical avant-gardes were far from singular in East-Central Europe and were symptomatic not only for their internal struggle for self-legitimization in their respective literary fields, but also for a wider cultural programme, specific for that time and place – of integrating artistic endeavors in the process of nation building. What I hope to have achieved in this segment was how, despite having been associated widely with the urbanization (in an imagological sense) and the modernization of the Romanian literary culture in the first half of the twentieth century, the avant-garde strove to negotiate elements of their local cultural heritage within the context of both internal struggles of updating the local by incorporating Western movements or trends and external endeavors of self-validation in the international scene of the European avant-garde, by introducing it to regional specificity. However paradoxical it may seem, particularly in the context of its own marginalization within its literary culture, the Romanian avant-garde has been a constant mediator between the local and the global, battling on either fronts within a transnational framework that sought to overcome the geoliterary boundaries segregating it from the international field of modernist cultural production.

Another important segment of my doctoral thesis employed quantitative and network analyses in order to explain certain cultural phenomena. Thus, by means of quantitative research, the reception of futurism in the Romanian cultural space of the first half of the twentieth century was investigated. By analyzing the transnational network of the futurist manifestoes in a localized, national circuit through rapid text translation and dissemination, the chapter dedicated to this occurrence closely followed the main temporal milestones of the reception of futurism in Romania (from its earliest occurrence to its 1930s climax, following F.T. Marinetti's visit to Romania) in order to assess the full extent of the impact of the artistic movement on Romanian literary journalism. At the same time, by drawing on Edward Said's concept of "traveling theory" (originating in his well-known 1982 essay), the segment also tried to propose the idea of a "traveling avant-garde," materialized in Marinetti's own brand of cultural entrepreneurship that led to such a welcoming reception in a country that had no discernible futurist movement. What I found in my investigation

was that Marinetti's visibility in Romanian culture came from two main directions: 1. his own brand of cultural entrepreneurship, amplified by his cultural capital accumulated over his years of artistic activity and; 2. the direct and indirect translation of texts written by Marinetti. The intense coverage of futurist texts in Romanian periodicals, even in the absence of a Romanian futurist movement per se, attests to the constructivist nature of the reception of futurism in Romania, in addition to its broader and more far-reaching way of exporting itself through Marinetti's distinctive type of internationalism. And while it is true that futurism did not create any visible emulation in Romanian literature outside its own national avant-gardes, its towering presence in Romanian journalism, despite the relative lack of a discernible effect on the literature itself, speaks more of the youth of Romanian literature faced with a trend that was born out of a need to demolish its cultural heritage. For these arguments, while I believe that futurism was a true transnational modulator for the Romanian avant-gardes (as far as its own discursive and aesthetic strategies are concerned), its inherent destructive and deconstructive pathos had little effect on Romanian literature itself. On the other hand, the type of cultural branding achieved by Marinetti both through translation and systematic dissemination of his manifestos far exceeds the mere literary reach of futurism in Romania, and for this reason I believe that the case of futurism in this country speaks far more of intercultural exchanges in a context marked by aggressive nationalism than of aesthetic influences.

If the East-Central European space designates the *locus* of the development of the avant-gardes, and the interliterary community nominates the *entity* by which the avant-gardes define themselves, the network defines the *general mechanism* through which the historical avant-gardes of East-Central Europe developed their entire interface for transnational cultural negotiation. Once the cultural identity of the East-Central European avant-gardes was established, the particular position of these movements within their own national literary systems needed to be made clear. In order to determine this position, I turned to Jürgen Habermas' theories on the "public sphere", as well as later developments proposed by scholars such as Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser on the "counterpublic sphere". The 19th century saw taking shape the first articulations of what Pierre Bourdieu called the "autonomy of cultural production", made possible through the emergence of the bohemia as a disrupting factor in the institution of art. This furthered the consolidation of the bourgeois

artistic field through a process of transfer of cultural authority from aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Once established, bourgeois art, which was at first an alternative form of cultural production, became institutionalized, serving now, in this form, as the mainstream against which other, newer forms of cultural production came into being. If, according to Habermas, the public sphere represents the domain in which the field of power interacts with the cultural field, the counterpublic sphere, as discussed in recent studies, interacts with the public sphere through "fully oppositional forms of cultural production" (Raymond Williams).

With all these aspects in mind, there remained to be seen to what extent can a networking model be applied to avant-garde cultural production. The analysis of literary phenomena as networks of individuals, literary groups or institutions is not exactly a novelty. Sociology of literature, with leading figures in the field such as Robert Escarpit, Lucien Goldmann or Pierre Bourdieu, has developed a series of analytic models that, especially in the case of Bourdieu, were later recovered within the methodological frameworks of World Literature studies. In addition to traditional literary sociology, I also proposed, for the analysis of avant-garde cultural production, the recent developments in the field of *digital humanities*, which implies the use of empirical data in the analysis of large corpuses of text. The ability to visualize patterns (diachronic and synchronic) within an entire literary corpus opened up new perspectives through which we can question the collaborative networks that constitute the foundation of literary modernity across the globe. This "distant reading" (Franco Moretti) was able to offer visual renditions of an entire "literary economy" (Matthew Jockers), all the while revealing significant details that cannot be identified through close-readings. While data visualization cannot substitute actual interpretation, it can be hardly disputed that such approaches add to a rich hermeneutical and metadiscursive tradition by offering factual evidence of previous interpretations that were more intuitive than empirical. This is not to say that I proposed a "hegemony of numbers" (James English), but rather make use of network abstractions in order to visualize patterns that could serve as arguments towards an alternative approach to literary sociology.

Such resulting networks provided the necessary data needed for a *relational* approach to the sociology of literature. Mustafa Emirbayer's manifesto for a relational sociology was the starting point of my attempt to use visual abstractions of networks in order to analyze

interliterary relations between the East-Central European avant-gardes. Emirbayer makes a very strong case for a shift from an *inter-actional model*, which refers to models of interaction produced between independent entities, towards a *trans-actional model*, according to which any and all transactions between individuals cannot be possible by isolating the specific relation between the individuals. Rather than being simple interactions devoid of consequences between members of a community, the interliterary processes underpinning the evolution of East-Central European avant-gardes are the result of systematic *transactions* and the relational patterns that structure them. I went on to see if a relational approach to the networks of the avant-garde could explain an entire host of processual dynamics through which the evolution of the avant-garde (as an interliterary community *and* a counterpublic sphere) can be followed through the series of interliterary processes and transactions that determine it.

The network abstractions that I managed to create using tools borrowed from the field of Digital Humanities showed that indeed there was an effervescent activity of cross-border relations, cross-promotional articles and, in general, an entire alternative field of modernist cultural production within the avant-garde periodical network of East-Central Europe. What Pascale Casanova called "the international of small nations" was made visible through network analysis, and while general cultural journalism of Romania, for instance, focused on the reception of internationally acclaimed avant-garde artists, the avant-garde periodicals dedicated more articles to the avant-garde artists of the neighboring countries than to these central figures of the European avant-garde.