

Ph.D. thesis

The body of the letter.
The tensions between the verbal and the iconic in Isidore Isou's quest for totality

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Abstract:

The interest that Isidore Isou, the founder of the Lettrist avant-garde movement, shows for the creation of a total poetic language reveals, in fact, a long Western cultural tradition, focused on the dream of a universal language and of a total aesthetic experience. Animated by the ideal of a complete and omnipotent form of expression, Lettrism sets out, in the early forties, to revolutionise the artistic and literary world, by orientating the creative act towards the minimal unit of communication: the letter. Deprived of its “signified”, the poem would return to the “tangible flesh of poetry”, namely its audible and visual body, and would (re)discover its true expressive force. My work aims to analyse the implications of Isou's quest of totality, and to question the functional limits of the Lettrist language.

Key words: Isidore Isou, Lettrism, letter, national identity, Judaism, Romania, France, total work of art, universal language, verbal, iconic, poetry, music, painting

Summary:

Centred on Isidore Isou and on his obsessive quest for a “total form of art”, our paper concentrates on a very specific aspect of the 20th century European avant-gardes, namely their interdisciplinary character, and questions the functional limits of a “dialogue between arts” in the post-war cultural context. Isou's dream to create a total artistic practice and a universal language within Lettrism – which is, according to him, the last and most radical

avant-garde movement of the 20th century –, proves to be much more than an isolated type of utopia, but a modern avatar of the ancient fantasy of an “all-embracing art form”. The contacts that Isou’s poetry manages to develop with other artistic fields offer the necessary tools for a thorough analysis of the concrete limits of such a comprehensive project, placed in the foreground of the contemporary western avant-gardes, and reveal the challenges of a complete and universal artistic experience, unanimously accessible or equally foreign to all.

Born in Romania in 1925, Isidore Isou seems to largely reiterate the artistic destinies of his elder avant-garde compatriots (Tristan Tzara, the Janco brothers, and, later on, Eugene Ionesco, Emile Cioran, Claude Sernet etc.), deciding early on to leave Romania and follow his creative dream in a more mature cultural environment, capable of providing the notoriety and the immortality that his young artist soul is seeking. Nevertheless, sixty years after having founded Lettrism, Isidore Isou is still barely mentioned by literary histories, art dictionaries, anthologies and specialised treatises about the avant-garde. In spite of the permanent attention that he tries to bring upon Lettrism throughout his life and the numerous Lettrist echoes amongst contemporary avant-garde movements, most of the times, Isou’s name is lost from sight. The Lettrist exhibitions from the sixties (1961-1962 –Nahmer Gallery, Paris; 1963: Valérie Schmidt Gallery; 1964 – Stadler Gallery) are followed by a few others: two in 2006 (at Livorno, Italy and at Besançon, in France) and two in 2007, posthumously organised by François Poyet at the Romanian Cultural Institute from Paris, and by Frédéric Aquaviva at the International Poetry Center from Marseille. However, until today, there has been no monographic or book-length study dedicated to Isou, and no attempt to reunite his works in a complete edition, despite Isou’s constant efforts in this regard, as well as his considerable influence on worldwide-known personalities, such as Guy Debord, or on significant revolutionary movements, such as The International Situationist Group.

In this context, this paper represents a first attempt to consider Isou’s work in its totality and singularity, to better identify its general field of extension and its specific difference, so that its aims and stakes become more visible in the history of the European avant-gardes.

Enrolled, ever since his adolescence, in a sinuous process of artistic creation and recognition – which eventually leads him to Paris –, Isidore Isou seems obsessed with the idea of artistic immortality and with conquering the international artistic world. He does not simply need to create art, but to guarantee its survival throughout History. Consequently, Isou's dream goes beyond the frontiers of an individual, isolated or singular aesthetics, aiming towards the universal. As an artist, Isou wishes nothing more and nothing less than to become “the most important figure of his time”, the true “Messiah” of the western culture. His ideal is to provide to the grand public the possibility of a complete and direct aesthetic experience, placed above national and cultural frontiers, to create and promote an all-embracing artwork, an omnipotent artistic form, capable of fulfilling, once and for all, humans' aesthetic cravings. Therefore, all fragmentary art form needs to be abandoned for a more complex vision of the whole; all creative gesture needs to consider the final unity, a total and integral heavenly perfection.

As innovatory as this approach might seem to Isidore Isou, it actually continues a long western cultural tradition, articulated around the prospect of a synthetic artistic experience and of a universal language. Since the Roman and Greek Antiquity, our civilisation has let itself be seduced time and again by the promise of a perfect form of communication, of a complete and direct means of expressing and transmitting the complexity of the human life, thought and emotion. However, Lettrism claims this intuition of a total form of artistic expression as its personal, particular trait. Hence, this characteristic becomes the great Lettrist “discovery”, because – according to Isidore Isou – this avant-garde movement is the only one to have succeeded in transposing the ancient utopia of a total art form into a real aesthetic experience.

The main question to which this paper is trying to answer to is whether such a “transposition” is truly possible or whether we are, in fact, dealing with an incidental “translation”, with a specific form of “totality” that only functions within the limits of the Lettrist artistic practice. In this sense, our reflexion concentrates on the particular connotations of “totality” and “total artwork” in the context of Isidore's Isou art, and follows the implications of this specific definition all through Isou's artistic path.

As a result, a more thorough consideration of Isidore Isou's work reveals that his idea of "totality" and "total artwork" differs considerably from the customary avant-garde definitions, which seem to understand the concept of totality more in the terms of an "alternative totality" – to quote Thimothée Picard –, that is of a distorted assembly, conditioned by its innate and insurmountable fragmentary nature. On the contrary, Isou's interpretation of the word is more likely to resemble the encyclopaedic projects of the 17th and 18th centuries, understanding totality more as a gathering of *all* existing or potential artistic, cultural and scientific forms. Nonetheless, Isou aims to achieve much more than a synthesis obtained by means of juxtaposition, but an authentic redefinition of art, of its structure and its objectives. In this way, Lettrism would sketch the profile of a new complex and hybrid art form, of a unique aesthetic experience, with which everyone would equally resonate.

Divided in four major sections, this thesis aims to gradually unfolding the object of Isou's "total artistic practice", revealing its essence, its units and its frontiers.

The first chapter, *Forging of a name*, places the problem of "totality" in a more complex context, and tries to point towards the nuclei of Isou's obsession. Thus, Isidore Isou's fascination with the concept of totality seems to send back to some particular historical circumstances from the artist's youth. As a Romanian teenager of Jewish origin, Isou is already confronted with the reality of a fragmentary society, and, consequently, with the idea of "fragment" versus "totality", of "part" versus "whole". On the one hand, descendent of a Jewish Romanian family, Isidore Isou becomes an artist in a quite specific cultural and historical context. Just as his fellow avant-garde predecessors, Isou starts by being an adolescent – Ioan Isidore Goldstein – with a very ambiguous image of his own identity, defining himself more by contrast than by analogy with the society he is supposed to belong to. Part of an ethnic group which, in the international political context of the first half of the 20th century, is tolerated, yet not accepted, Isou grows up haunted by the conscience of a marginal position and the feeling of being simultaneously rejected and accepted, tolerated and condemned. He is a member of a society which paradoxically places him apart; he is a fragment of an assembly, but a fragment that cannot reflect the whole. On the other hand,

from inside the Romanian culture, Isou constantly projects himself on an inferior position compared to the other European cultures. Once again, similarly to his predecessors, Isou continues a deeply rooted Romanian cultural complex and becomes aware early on of the constraints he is exposing himself to as a Romanian artist, placed just outside the stage of Western modernity. And yet, Isidore Isou cannot dream of nothing else than conquering the international artistic world, of becoming the greatest artistic figure in History, of securing the immortality of his Name and of his work. For that, he sets up on a long and difficult process of artistic consecration, constantly reinforcing the bond between his project and his newly-created artistic identity.

This first chapter intends to underline the implications of such a legitimisation process, namely to reveal the subtle link between the creation of an artistic identity and its corresponding artistic universe.

A second part of the thesis, *The quest of a dream: the experience of “totality” in the poetics of Isidore Isou*, takes even further the questioning of Isidore Isou’s total artistic project, and tries to identify other possible replicas of this artistic dream. Hence, the problem of an initial ethnical and national identity complex seems to also have consequences on the artist’s *linguistic* identity. According to Isou, the actual birth of Lettrism is related to a feeling of a marginal linguistic identity. Reading one day, in French, Keyserling’s verse: “le poète dilate les vocables” [“the poet dilutes the words”], the Romanian mother-tongue teenager mistakes the French term “vocable” for its Romanian paronym “vocală” [“vowel”]. His confusion is due to an insufficient master of French, the cultural language of the early 20th century, as well as to his education in a “marginal” cultural environment, which only seems to replay in a minor tone the statements of the western culture. Consequently, Isou is even more determined to overcome his “minor” position, to conquer France and, implicitly, its cultural heritage. However, he will not be able to do so without inventing an art form that goes beyond cultural, ethnic, national and linguistic frontiers, namely an integral and universal artistic language.

The problem that appears is to identify the concrete means for making such a project come true. Giving a “body” to the dream of a perfect language has been for centuries the

main challenge of artists who let themselves seduced by the promise of a total aesthetic experience. The third part of our paper, *The Lettrist avatars of the “total art”*, concentrates on the nature and the limits of Isou’s process of creating a total artistic language. Thus, the grain of this “perfect language”, that Isou is set to place at the foundation of all creative act, is *the letter*, the minimal unit of communication, recalling in the same time two distinct fields of signification: the verbal and the graphic. Focussed on this fundamental element, human communication will rediscover its genuine force of expression, its poetic strength, long-time forgotten in the meanders of common language. In other words, it’s the poetry that will provide the solution to the meaning crises which has shaken the western art. Nonetheless, this particular kind of poetry pushes to the extreme the disintegration of poetic discourse, reaching the limit that all the prior writers and poets have feared: the total abandon of *words* for *letters*. Isou claims, therefore, to have achieved the destructive process of all previous avant-garde revolutions, to be the last great creator, the true “Messiah” of the European (and even worldwide) culture, turning poetry towards its own “body”, that is towards its musical and iconic nature. Deprived of its meaning and released (at least theoretically) from its restrictive lexical chains, poetry is finally ready to path the way towards a pure, elementary and universal language; for the first time in human history, poetry will offer a language common to all.

With the help of a more applied analysis of some of Isou’s poetic works of art, the last chapter, *“The tangible flesh of poetry”*, discusses the functioning and the limits of such a “total poetic language”. In this sense, the aim is to determine whether Lettrist poetry, and *in extenso*, Lettrist art actually manages to communicate exclusively with the help of this minimal unit of communication, or if, from beyond the Lettrist poem, another form of discourse insures the understanding and the functioning of this “pure poetic language”. In this context, the paper focuses on identifying the main implications of *the letter’s* presence within the Lettrist poem, namely in observing its impact on the musical and iconic levels.

All these questions finally led to accepting a scission in the heart of the Lettrist poetic and linguistic practice, in other words an essential difference between the level of the total and universal language eagerly promoted by Isou, and the standard language, subjected to the

general linguistic norms, adjacent and absolutely indispensable for the understanding of the Lettrist artistic stakes. If an unusual sequence of letters can suggest or induce a certain feeling or emotion during the public's reception of a work of art, it remains completely opaque in the attempt of justifying an artistic vision with a complex programme. In the end, a true *understanding within general misunderstanding* is possible only with the price of a prior mediation, of a perfectly intelligible adjacent discourse, capable of crediting the new artistic game.

Extended to the whole of Isou's artistic project and to his quest of totality, this debate raises a series of questions regarding the concrete possibilities of a synthetic and universal artistic programme, compelling us to reconsider the reasons that nurture Isou's obstinacy with such an approach.

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