

## ON YUGOSLAV POSTSTRUCTURALISM INTRODUCTION TO “ART, SOCIETY/TEXT”

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“Umetnost, družba/tekst” was an editorial published in the Slovenian journal *Problemi-Razprave* (Problems-Debates) in 1975. It was written by the journal’s editorial board at the time: Mladen Dolar, Daniel Levski, Jure Mikuž, Rastko Močnik, and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>1</sup> The journal, which is still published today under the name *Problemi*, was the central outlet of the so-called Slovenian Lacanian school, and as such the most important place for the reception of French antihumanist philosophy in the former Yugoslavia. The journal’s concept was based on interpreting French poststructuralism in the spirit of *Tel Quel* magazine; anti-humanist Marxism in the spirit of Louis Althusser; theoretical psychoanalysis in the spirit of Jacques Lacan and his followers; as well as the special blend of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian ideology critique that characterized the French journal *Cahiers pour l’analyse*.<sup>2</sup> For this issue of *ARTMargins*, the original text’s first two parts are translated, in which the theoretical orientation of the whole magazine is elaborated; the excised third and fourth parts, which I will also

1 “Umetnost, družba/tekst: Nekaj pripomb o sedanjih razmerjih razrednega boja na področju književne produkcije in njenih ideologij” [Art, Society/Text: A Few Notes on Contemporary Relations in Class Struggle in the Domain of Literary Production and Its Ideologies], *Problemi-Razprave* XIII, nos. 3–5 (March–May 1975): 1–10.

2 One might also find theoretical and conceptual similarities between *Problemi* and other French poststructuralist periodicals, such as *Peinture*, *cahiers théoriques* and *Cahiers du cinéma*.

discuss briefly in this introductory commentary, focus on debates around the local literature scene in Slovenia and Yugoslavia at that time.

*Problemi* was a unique example of a journal seeking to introduce structuralism, poststructuralism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis into debates about society, culture, ideology, and art in a socialist country. In so doing, it realized a critique and deconstruction of humanist philosophies, including Marxist variants of existentialism and phenomenology, which had hitherto dominated Yugoslav theory (the protagonists of which were the philosophers gathered around the journal *Praxis*—Gajo Petrović, Milan Kangrga, Danko Grlić, Rudi Supek, and others). In relation to art, *Problemi* represented a gradual overcoming of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde utopian experiments of the 1960s and '70s. Most notable here, at least in Slovenia, was the neo-avant-garde utopianism of the OHO group, which sought to bridge *Arte Povera*, land art, and process art through a “mystical” conceptualism in the spirit of the hippie movement. The journal also anticipated the post-modernist strategies of the Yugoslav retro-avant-garde nearly a decade later, especially the cynical and citational-eclectic strategies of the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective, which did not seek a utopian transformation of the world so much as an anti-utopian transgression in the field of ideology. Although *Problemi* was basically a journal in the mold of *Tel Quel*, its greatest difference from many similar French journals in the 1960s lay in the absence of radical Maoism from its purview. This was due to the specificity of the Yugoslav context at the time, which rested on the ideal of already-realized self-managed socialism.<sup>3</sup> The journal, as well as the editorial discussed below, had none of that characteristically French “zeal and ecstasy that *Tel Quel*-ian writings had,” according to critic Miško Šuvaković, “precisely because it emerged in a postrevolutionary society that no longer allowed for *charismatic* revolutionary rhetoric, but sought to relocate it to *remote*

3 The concept of socialist self-management was introduced in 1950. It emerged through a revision of revolutionary state Marxism of the Bolshevik type toward a state that would proclaim and implement direct democracy: it was based on the concept of debureaucratizing productive labor by switching from planned, statist policymaking to workers' self-management and a socialist free market. The postulates of self-management were elaborated by Edvard Kardelj, Boris Kidrič, Milovan Đilas, and others, by relying on Marx's slogan of “factories to the workers” and a revolutionary implementation of the social-utopian teachings of the Paris Commune, and by forging active political ties with British Labour and Scandinavian, Belgian, and German social democrats.

historicizations of the revolution or to theoretical and philosophical distances between the revolution and analysis of class struggle, divided into different registers.”<sup>4</sup>

*Problemi* was not alone in its endeavors, but part of a broader culture advancing Slovenian poststructuralism and Yugoslav readings of Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Among these were the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis in Ljubljana and the *Analecta* publishing house, especially its series *Filozofija skozi psihoanalizo* (Philosophy through Psychoanalysis), which initially published lectures given at the Society, based on Lacanian structuralist analysis of classical German philosophy such as Hegel and Marxist social theory. We can also think of the continuation of the Slovenian “alternative,” based on a blend of punk, 1980s youth cultures, and the Slovenian retro-avant-garde’s radical artistic procedures—Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a form of ideology critique, acted as the theoretical framework for the emergence of this amalgam.<sup>5</sup>

As noted above, the article comprises four sections: the first contains the journal’s programming policy, which was based on a Marxist, materialist theory of art interpreted through poststructuralism and psychoanalysis; the second, third, and fourth sections analyze the local Slovenian situation in the domain of art and culture under self-managed socialism, observed through the journal’s antihumanist lens.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Miško Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza* [Discursive Analysis] (Belgrade: Univerzitet umetnosti, 2006), 466.

5 The authors of “Umetnost, družba/tekst” went on to become the chief representatives of Yugoslav antihumanist philosophy. Mladen Dolar, for instance, applied Lacanian psychoanalysis in his interpretations of German classical idealism (the most important of which concerns Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*), as well as music and opera. Rastko Močnik generated unique ways to apply Althusser’s theories of ideology to political philosophy, the sociology of art, theoretical psychoanalysis, semiotics, linguistics, and leftist political activism. Jure Mikuž is an art historian who later undertook historical anthropology and art criticism, while Slavoj Žižek today is the most prominent international philosopher in the field of Lacanian ideology critique. He published his first books soon after the emergence of this editorial, proceeding to his current global fame only after 1990.

6 The notion of humanism within Marxist theory implies a striving for a kind of holistic thought, which views Marxism as a great synthetic philosophy of the teleological emancipation of the entire society. It is based on reading Marx within a dialectic of alienation and (self-)emancipation; in that sense, totality is interpreted as a normative aim to be attained in the process of social emancipation. By contrast, within an antihumanist perspective, history is viewed not as a teleological, diachronic process leading toward the self-realization of the human subject or society, but as a synchronic field of structures, or relations. As such, structure (or social process) precedes the human subject. Antihumanism abandoned the ideas of universality, rationalism, absolute truth, linearity, and so on.

The text's main purpose is to offer a materialist critique of the bourgeois concept of artistic autonomy, which was an inherent characteristic of the phenomenon now known as Yugoslav socialist modernism. Following the country's break with Stalin and the Cominform in 1948, Yugoslavia rejected socialist realism as its official artistic doctrine, instead adopting the formalist procedures of international modernism as signs of the country's liberalization of art and culture. At first, this turn brought cultural emancipation under the conditions of socialist self-management; yet, by advocating artistic autonomy and the apolitical, socialist modernism was often a locus of bureaucratized art and culture, as well as a stronghold of conservative resistance against the radical experiments of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde (in that regard, art historians have described this phenomenon as "moderate modernism" and "socialist aestheticism," as well).<sup>7</sup> The *Problemi* editorial offers a deconstruction of socialist modernism as a relic of a traditional European humanism that was also highly aestheticized—that is, arguing that the dominant ideological paradigm in Yugoslav culture at the time was predicated on a bourgeois fetishization of art.

Instead of the humanist concept of artistic autonomy, the editors insist on interpreting art as a form of material practice (in a traditional Marxist sense, the notion of "material practice" implies that human life is not determined by consciousness, but rather by its material and social conditions of existence—modes of production, ideology, social relations, etc.) that is fundamentally linked to class struggle. Nonetheless, whereas classical Marxist theory links materialism and class struggle with economic processes, the editorial insists on reconceptualizing and associating those concepts with the *Tel Quel*-derived concept of *signification* or *textual practice*. In that regard, the materialism of *Problemi* is not that of economic processes as the basic determinant of history and society, but of language and culture viewed as complex systems of producing meaning in a historically given society. Its materialism, in other words, is that of *discourse* in the poststructuralist sense. As their central term, the authors single out the classic Marxist concept of *reflection*, but not in its humanistically understood

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7 For a more detailed discussion, see Ješa Denegri, "Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene, 1950–1970," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, edited by Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 170–208.



insisted on the impossibility of reconciling social antagonisms, reflecting the poststructuralist concept of difference, as opposed to the idealist category of totality. What it sought to deconstruct, then, was the economic basis of classical Marxism: whereas vulgar Marxists situated social antagonisms in the field of economy, Slovenian Lacanians, including the editors of “Art, Society/Text,” located them in the field of culture, which for them was the field of signification. In other words, social antagonisms relate not only to class differences, but also to those of gender, race, nation, generation, subculture, and so on. No society is free of inherent antagonisms—any society that declares itself non-antagonistic inevitably falls into totalitarianism. Marxism is thereby transformed from a utopian idea of synthesis into a materialist theory of transgressivity, gaining a basically negative or antinormative determination.

The editorial’s third and fourth parts (omitted from our translation) analyze the state of Slovenian literature at the beginning of the 1970s. As in the visual arts at that time, so-called sober modernism or socialist aestheticism dominated in Slovenian literature. The editors critique these dominant trends in Slovenian national culture and link them with philosophical idealism in interpreting art and culture. The editors also deal with the contemporary Slovenian literary scene: they emphasize the importance of artists such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Mallarmé in literature, Cézanne in painting, and Schoenberg in music, all of whom marked a radical materialist *cut* in Western culture, from art as a disinterested and beautiful object toward interpreting art as a material, signifying practice. The authors stress that such a radical materialist cut had yet to happen in Slovenian and Yugoslav culture, and especially in literature, notwithstanding the efforts of individual avant-garde artists. They further highlight the significance of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde, explicitly mentioning the poetic works of Boris Paš, Aleš Kermanauer, and Istok G. Plamen, and especially the OHO group’s experiments in the domain of poetry, even as the authors maintain that while OHO came “to the brink of making such a break,” they did not ultimately achieve it.

The OHO group was active between 1966 and 1971 and went through a number of stages in its neo-avant-garde experimentation; one of them was so-called reism. In its work, the group was inspired by phenomenology, and especially by the Slovenian philosopher Taras Kermanauer’s theoretical thinking; during its reistic phase, the group

acted in the domain of pure perception, working with phenomena themselves—that is, with forms of appearance in their unmediated presence. In line with that thinking, Marko Pogačnik, a member of the group, used a simple procedure to make impressions of quotidian objects and then gave them, in the space of a gallery, the appearance of immediate presence. Reistic poetry, for instance, entails working to transform text into a book-object (or a box as a collection of objects, or to transform a spatial object in the spirit of visual poetry). It insists on a tautological relation between the meaning of a word and its visual phenomenality—a word literally points to visual phenomenality, and vice versa. The authors of the editorial accept the significance of the reistic poets' neo-avant-garde experiments, but criticize precisely this engagement with phenomenologically closed, essentialist, and ontologically founded systems that disregard the productive, heteronomous, intertextual, rhizomatic, open, and transgressive nature of language. Throughout the history of *Problemi*, especially in the 1970s, literary contributions were not published very often; instead, each issue consisted mostly of papers that dealt with Lacanian psychoanalysis, a fusion of psychoanalytic theory and traditional philosophy, linguistics, antipedagogy, and so on. But an important part of every issue was dedicated to art, and particularly to film and literary theory. Similarly to *Tel Quel*, those contributions promoted so-called textual writing, in which the linguistic or material aspect of the text prevailed over the representation of external reality. The authors of those articles privileged blurring the divide between theoretical and fictional writing and the aesthetics of “the unfinished” and “the infinite.” In line with this method, the editors' critique of the OHO group pursued a deconstruction of phenomenological essentialism through a structural analysis of language.

The concluding paragraphs of the article provide guidelines for the journal's future activities. From today's perspective, the text offers clear indications about the development of Slovenian and Yugoslav poststructuralism, which would operate in the domain of deconstructing the national(ist) understanding of culture. It is also an example of “cleansing” Marxist theory of all remnants of idealism (such as economism, humanism, mechanical interpretations of the categories of reflection and class struggle, etc.), and especially linking up with the historical avant-gardes' heritage (symbolism, zenitism, surrealism, dada, and Russian avant-gardes) of interpreting art and culture. In the

years that followed, Slovenian poststructuralism developed in multiple directions, reinterpreting classical aesthetics from a humanist study of the beautiful into a materialist, interdisciplinary platform for studying culture (in that regard, especially relevant is the work of Aleš Erjavec), via an Althusserian-Lacanian philosophy of science (Rado Riha), the semiotics of painting (Braco Rotar, Tomaž Brejc, Jure Mikuž), and a definite crystallization of the Slovenian Lacanian school as ideological critique (Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik, Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, Renata Salecl, etc.). What was merely suggested by the theoretical work of the authors gathered around *Problemi* culminated, during the 1980s, with the emergence of the Slovenian youth alternative and the development of retro-avant-garde artistic strategies by collectives such as Laibach and Borghesia in music and the visual arts, IRWIN in painting, and the Scipion Nasice Sisters in theater.

Yugoslav poststructuralism represents a unique place in the development of the humanities among Europe's other post-communist countries, where, due to their specific political and historical circumstances, no reception of French poststructuralist philosophy was possible, let alone a nuanced critique of poststructuralism's revision of Marxist theory. The Yugoslav variant of self-managed socialism was liberal enough to permit such a synthesis. Moreover, the reception of poststructuralism in Yugoslavia was no mere importation of ready-made models of French philosophy, but rather their reinterpretation according to the conditions that prevailed in Yugoslavia at the time. Most of the theorists gathered around *Problemi*, and later the Slovenian Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, had a thorough education in Marxism, a consequence of socialist Yugoslavia's "ideological horizon." At the same time, this generation lived in a system that enabled them to study and pursue further education abroad, typically at universities in France (Rastko Močnik studied at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Slavoj Žižek studied at Université Paris VIII Vincennes à Saint-Denis, and other Slovenian poststructuralist thinkers pursued similar paths in their educations). This mix of Marxism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis eventually enabled Yugoslav theory to make an original contribution internationally (culminating in Žižek's international success after the 1989 English translation of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*). Slovenian Lacanian theory, sketched out in this 1975 editorial of *Problemi*, effected a sort of paradigm shift in discussions of psycho-

