

The Intersection between Art and Politics in Interwar Romania¹

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Abstract

As Jürgen Habermas suggested, „the spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity,” which defined „various avant-garde movements... finally reached its climax in the Cabaret Voltaire of the dadaists and in surrealism.” The surrealists’ documents, declarations, actions, and manifestoes of the 1920s and 1930s point out to the apparently tireless crusade against public misinterpretations of their intent. On the other hand, there is little doubt that a political situation can exercise a given influence on avant-garde art in particular. While using primary and secondary sources, I look into the case of Gellu Naum just to illustrate the tensions between art and politics in the interwar Romania.

Keywords

Gellu Naum; Avant-garde; Cabaret Voltaire; Siguranța; surrealism; Romania

Switzerland has become, with the passing of time, a cliché of neutrality, although the destinies of many socially and politically engaged spirits started, unfolded or recovered there. It is the case of the artists gathered around the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, a quasi-cultural space founded in 1916 by Dadaist Hugo Ball² and, among others, by the

1 This paper is a result of a research made possible by the financial support of the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132400 – „Young successful researchers – professional development in an international and interdisciplinary environment”.

2 In his diary, „Flight out of Time”, Hugo Ball describes the opening night: „The place was full to bursting; many could not get in. About six in the evening, when we were still busy hammering and putting up Futurist posters, there appeared an oriental-looking deputation of four little men with portfolios and pictures under their arms, bowing politely many times. They introduced themselves: Marcel Janco the painter, Tristan Tzara, George Janco and a fourth, whose name I did not catch. Arp was also there, and we came to an understanding without many words. Soon, Janco’s opulent Archangels hung alongside the other objects of beauty and, that same evening, Tzara gave a reading of poems, conservative in style, which he rather endearingly fished out of the various pockets of his coat”. Source: Adrian NOTZ, in „Introduction” to the *Catalogue* of the exhibition

Romanians Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu. During WW1, Switzerland maintained its neutrality, as I have already mentioned, which allowed many refugees to set up ideological, cultural, artistic and sometimes even political projects here. And as any place has (besides other perfectly measurable coordinates) a certain spirit, Cabaret Voltaire had, from its very beginning, a fine internationalist touch. In this space of European cultural effervescence, you could hear, in all languages, the expressions of the cultural trend of the day (Tristan Tzara, for instance, used to recite his poems in Romanian). Another thing to be noted from the very beginning is that about half of the Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire were Romanian³. How did that happen?

We should mention that the flattering nickname of „Little Paris” that the Romanian capital had at that time was closely related to the cultural and intellectual ebullience of the Bucharest of that period and, moreover, to the almost established tradition of the petite bourgeoisie of that time to study in the major academic centers of Europe (particularly in Paris, Vienna or Berlin) and to return and attempt to implement this whole imported conglomeration of visions and ideas. However, in spite of this cosmopolitan pattern⁴, many commentators believe that the Romanian avant-garde stood out in the great internationalist family due to a sound Eastern European derivative component. In fact, for Hugo Ball himself, the Romanians at Cabaret Voltaire largely remained Orientals. Last, but not least, the Romanians in Zurich had a Semitic family background and, in the political context of that period, their exodus to the West had a deeply pragmatic meaning. In its connection with politics, the avant-garde was many times a response to politics, a kind of effect of a marked causality. With regard to the period discussed here, we can say easier now (although remaining in the realm of speculation) that the avant-garde in arts can be ideally reproduced only in a political climate that permits the freedom of choice and, consequently, of controversy. Nevertheless, a totalitarian (or totalitarian-like) society cannot allow sufficient space for manifestation to the avant-garde arts. Moreover, the avant-garde often seems to accept a fashion instead of creating or promoting a new one. Starting from this fact, the hypothesis according to which the aesthetic radicalism (in arts) and the social radicalism (in politics) are related is completely false from a historical perspective⁵. For instance, the political phase of surrealism was, actually, very short. Louis Aragon abandons surrealism for communism, while others solve this option dilemma by surrendering communism and remaining faithful to the surrealist art⁶. Obviously, the positioning of avant-garde artists towards politics (although initially it was a matter of fending off politics) could only generate an infinite series of tensions, surrenders and returns. And that was because, in order to stay at the center of attention and at the core of the ideological convulsions of that time, a transition needed to be made from the subjectivity of individual freedom (expressed artistically) to the more radical

Dada East? The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire (Fargfabriken/ Stockholm/ Sweden, Bucharest: RH Printing House, 2007), 5.

3 Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East. The Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The MIT Press, 2006).

4 „Poets, artists, doctors, lawyers, politicians, they all studied in Paris, Vienna, Berlin or Munich. In Romania, Cubism is more Cubistic and Futurism is more Futuristic than anywhere else. Small French-like policemen harass the peasants on their way to the farmers' market, the cabarets and variety theaters are only cheap copies of those in Montmartre; one can see revues based on French originals, sad and boring, copies of some equivocal comedies imported directly from Théâtre Antoine or the Comédie Française. In brief: a fantastic city in an incredible country. Thirty years later, everything will be different...” Source: Tom SANDQVIST, „Cuvînt înainte,” in *Arhiva Durerii* (Stockholm: Sweden/Bucharest: Fundația Academia Civică, 2000), 5.

5 Renato Poggioli, „The Avant-Garde and Politics,” in *Yale French Studies*, Literature and Revolution, No. 39 (1967): 181.

6 Poggioli, „The Avant-Garde and Politics,” 182.

subjectivity of denying social reality (expressed politically)⁷. Euphemistically speaking, putting the equal sign between the arts revolution and the social one today is a mere rhetorical act. And probably the only political and ideological recurrence of the avant-garde art is actually very little political (or even not political at all): its anarchism! After all, the avant-gardism is plagued by an exacerbated individualism, most frequently biographical and psychological – see the poem of Vladimir Mayakovsky, „To a Cut-Throat“, in which he combines the belief that he will survive his own death with a cult for the anonymous multitude (the masses of the future)⁸.

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However, when the avant-gardists leave the cocoon of art to become politically engaged, they do not do it to promote the artistic movement that used to give them an identity until not long before. They simply adhere to a political ideology completely disrupted from the original artistic manifesto. And as in most cases the ideology happens to be the communist one, the relations between the government and these persons turned into political actors suffer a fundamental mutation, too: in the 1930s, many Romanian avant-gardists come to the attention of the *Siguranta* (the Romanian secret police)!

Thus, the Romanian secret police (acting through Eugen Cristescu, the chief of police at that time) sent a telegram in 1934 to all regional police inspectors requesting them to take action to ban and prevent the distribution in the country of the „Commune“ magazine edited by the *Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires* (AEAR⁹ – Paris), and of the pamphlets entitled „Des Amendes“ (Paris), „La lutte de l'URSS pour la paix mondiale“ (Paris 1934, authors: I. Stalin, V. Molotov, M. Litvinov) and „Le travail des cellules d'Usines“ (Les publications révolutionnaires, Paris)¹⁰. In fact, the international congresses of „antifascist-communist“ writers were no longer attended by „avant-gardists“ or other representatives of various cultural and artistic movements, but simply by «communists» or communist sympathizers (the label difference is relevant for this transfer of identity that we referred to above as being paradigmatic of the transition – understood as a breakaway – from the sphere of arts to that of politics). Such a congress took place in 1935, in Paris, and the Romanian secret police knew all details (some major personalities of the international culture were among the participants: Aldous Huxley, George

7 Stelian Tănase, *Avangarda românească în arhivele Siguranței* (Iași: Polirom, 2008), 13-14.

8 Poggioli, „The Avant-Garde and Politics,” 184.

9 The purposes of the association, as stated in a copy of the Rules of AEAR sent to Professor Petre Constantinescu in Romania and intercepted by the *Siguranta*, included: „a). Organizing writers (of fiction and science criticism) and artists, workers and professionals, for actual participation in the class war in close cooperation with the revolutionary workers' organizations in France and the colonies, by systematically working with the worker and farmer contributors to the revolutionary press and with the Marxist circles, with the workers' groups in the fields of theater, cinematography, photography and radio, etc. b). Fighting against all nuances of the bourgeois ideology, fascism, down to social fascism; inducing the nonconformist writers and artists to take a stand and to become partners to the proletariat by adopting the political form of the UIER; c). Creating and developing a proletarian art and literature by adopting the dialectical materialism as a basis; d). Organizing rallies, contests, conferences, exhibitions, publications, etc., as well as any other forms of activity consistent with these purpose based on the national and international proportion; e). Promoting the formation of a national federation of the revolutionary proletarian culture and, until such formation, accepting and coordinating the efforts of the already existing cultural groups.” (Central National History Archives (hereinafter referred to as ANIC), fond 50, Dosar Nr. 1216 – Intelighenția Occidentală, „Statutul Asociației Scriitorilor și Artiștilor Revoluționari de la Paris,” November 11th, 1934).

10 ANIC, fond 50, Dosar Nr. 1216 – Intelighenția Occidentală, Telegrama cifrată Nr. 25516/27.03.1934.

Bernard Shaw, Leo Tolstoy, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Kostas Varnalis, etc.). „Public events“ of this kind often occasioned settlements of accounts even within the same artistic family – although it was clear that what had previously united them under the umbrella of the artistic manifesto was now dividing them, under the influence of a powerful argument: the political ideology! At that congress, Louis Aragon (the leader of the AEAR, but also a promoter of Surrealism) is confronted by his former comrade, André Breton, as the latter chose to publicly support Victor Serge (Victor Lvovich Kibalchich), a Russian writer and former Comintern journalist associated to the Trotskyist left-wing opposition.

The Romanian *Siguranta* also had detailed information concerning the relationship that Louis Aragon had with Victor Brauner (Romanian surrealist painter of Jewish origin) and, through him, with many other Romanian communist writers considered by the authorities in Bucharest as a branch of the French AEAR¹¹. Now, we realize that the political oppression against the cultural promoters has nothing to do with the substance of their artistic manifesto, but rather with their specific social option. The government does not see their works, paintings and artistic creations as a threat, but their actual anti-establishment actions. Nevertheless, the interest in the tumultuous relationship between the avant-garde artists and the politics is not generated by some significant result that their actions would ever had. As a matter of fact, the avant-gardists never changed the course of any major political events. What is interesting, indeed, is their polemical writing (the manifesto itself) and the attempt to associate their moral and intellectual pursuits with the purposes and methods of the internationalist communism. There were also several serious reasons that prevented the avant-gardists (and especially the surrealists) from projecting their metaphysical ambitions into social terms. Firstly, they believed that poetry (in particular) was no longer a skill of the few, a means of expression, but an activity of the mind accessible to everyone: a poetic communism! Thus, the poetry was taken down from the Empyrean of abstraction to the vernacular area of pure desire. However, in the early '20s, although it had already become a red thread in the avant-garde writings, the word „revolution“ did not have those political connotations yet: „The immediate meaning and purpose of the Surrealist revolution is not as much to change the manifest and physical order of things, but to create a state of agitation in people's minds“¹².

But it was that very „state of agitation“ that actually worried the authorities of the time, including the Romanian ones, not the number or organization potential of those who conveyed such messages: although officially established as a political group in 1921, the Romanian communists were banned on July 28th, 1924. This immediately triggered an unprecedented radicalization in the position of the pro-Soviet communists, culminating with the peasants' armed rebellion at Tatarbuniar (in Southern Bessarabia, a province of the Romanian Kingdom at that time), whose fundamental and declared purpose was to put an end to the Romanian occupation in Bessarabia. To stifle the Bolshevik-like uprising, the Bratianu government deployed artillery troops from the 3rd Romanian Army Corps in the area, as well as a navy unit. Therefore, it had become almost impossible for the Romanian authorities of the time to see the subtle differences between the communists of various orientations, the artists sympathizing with the communist internationalism and other categories of agitators. In this troubled political context, the oppression started by the *Siguranta* against any persons that allegedly had or may have had any connections with the communist movement actually became a matter of national security. The poetic dream of territorial mutations was actually the purely political background

11 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Louis Aragon, Nr. 27653, f. 3.

12 Maurice Nadeau, *Documents Surréalistes* (Paris, 1947), 44.

against which these avant-gardists fallen under the ideological fascination of communism were moving. Maybe Breton, Aragon, Iancu, Tzara, Gellu Naum (and others) were not interested in these matters of immediate actuality, but their even remote association to the cabalistic maneuvers and schemes of the Bolsheviks could not go unnoticed by the authorities of the time. In fact, the *Siguranta* was operating like any present-day secret service and the control of information and of transnational networks was a major component of the national security.

The ideas of these avant-gardists and their artistic credo were gradually directed towards the communist political ideology. As they were (of course) willing to change the world by conceptually transforming the reality, they did not always realize that the ideas had detectable consequences. And when they realized it, they either returned to the non-political version of their beliefs or completely abandoned the initial artistic manifesto to become true political militants.

The case of one of the most important representatives of the Romanian and Western Surrealism – Gellu Naum – is also paradigmatic. In 1934, Naum (who studied philosophy from 1933 to 1937) was member in „Amicii U.R.S.S.” (*“The Friends of U.S.S.R.”*), a so-called cultural association populated by left-wing (antifascist) intellectuals who wanted to strengthen the relations with the Soviet Union (although, as we mentioned earlier, the Romanian Kingdom was not on the best diplomatic terms with its eastern neighbor). Financed by the Comintern, this association was also banned on November 25th, 1934, by the Tatarescu government. However, the group that frequented the „Amicii” included remarkable intellectuals of the Romanian interbellum period: Iorgu Iordan, N. D. Cocea, Alexandru Sahia, Petre Pandrea, Tudor Bugnariu, Marcel Iancu, Zaharia Stancu, Demostene Botez and many others. Also in 1934, Gellu Naum planned to distribute to students and workers, as editor, „Tanara Generatie”¹³ (a newspaper considered subversive by the *Siguranta*). On December 29th, 1934, he did it right at the Grivita Railways Workshop, handing a copy of the paper to each worker who was coming or leaving from work¹⁴. To understand the anxiety of the authorities, we should remember that one year before, on February 16th, 1933, Romania had experienced the largest workers’ protests in its history to that date: due to the poor working conditions and low wages (also as a consequence of the world economic crisis), the railway workers at Grivita had violently clashed with the riot police. The incident resulted in many injuries and several deaths. We should also mention that the trade union at the Grivita Workshops had been penetrated and was manipulated by the communists who, immediately after 1945, did not hesitate to turn the incidents at Grivita into one of the central points of their propaganda messages. In January 1935, the *Siguranta* analyzed the content of „Tanara Generatie” newspaper and the conclusions of the authorities are recorded in the same archived documents: „it contains the usual communist theories about the class war, but the language is moderate, a fact explained by the communists’ change of tactical approach, as well as by their intention to maintain the possibility of publishing a legal newspaper to be distributed to the working masses”¹⁵ (the language was so moderate that not even the word „socialist” was used¹⁶). After only two issues, the newspaper it banned by order of the Ministry of the Interior, in February 1935, and consequently becomes clandestine¹⁷.

Gellu Naum is arrested on December 27th, 1935, under the accusation of having been caught writing „communist passwords” on the walls of buildings in Dr. Sergiu street, Dr. Felix street and Al. I. Cuza boulevard. A note to the Royal Chief

13 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Gellu Naum, Nr. 13507, f. 7.

14 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Gellu Naum, Nr. 13507, f. 8.

15 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Gellu Naum, Nr. 13507, f. 14.

16 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Gellu Naum, Nr. 13507, f. 17.

17 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Gellu Naum, Nr. 13507, f. 19.

Superintendent specified that Naum was not at his first arrest and that the police was aware that he was a member of the clandestine organization of the communist students in Romania¹⁸. Later, in 1938, Gellu Naum goes to Paris, to complete his philosophy studies at the Sorbonne (encouraged by Victor Brauner) and meets the group of André Breton and other veteran surrealists...



**Photo: Mug shot of Gellu Naum
taken after his arrest by the *Siguranta*!**

It is important to mention, however, that this pro-Stalinist fascination of the surrealists never was a univocal act. They had their share of mistakes and doubts, they went separate ways¹⁹ and became allies equally easy, depending on the sequence of events of the time (remember that it is the period that witnessed the fall of the German democracy, the Spanish civil war and the Moscow show trials by which Stalin eliminated his political opponents and which will be masterly depicted later by Arthur Koestler in *Darkness at Noon...*). In fact, the conclusion is rather simple: „Seized by the political turmoil, the surrealism of the '30s lives less on aesthetic experiences and on challenges and defiance compared to the '20s. It looks dated, consumed, exhausted, and harassed by its own visions and schisms. In fact, the war puts an end to this experience and turns it into a chapter in the art history handbook.”²⁰ Apparently, the surrealists had to dream politically – otherwise, they

18 ANIC, fond 95, Dosar personal Gellu Naum, Nr. 13507/6470, f. 7.

19 For instance, André Breton launched in 1930 the second essential proclamation of the movement (“Second manifeste du surréalisme”), a document that actually eliminates from the great family the surrealists who hesitated to embrace „collective action” with all its good and bad things: Raymond Queneau, André Masson, Robert Desnos and others. Later, these „dissidents” from the initial movement joined „lock, stock and barrel” the editor of the surrealist art magazine „Documents,” Georges Bataille.

20 Tănase, *Avangarda românească*, 42.

wouldn't have existed. Unfortunately for their cause, they failed to take political action. Moreover, they seemed to persist in cultivating a pessimism deriving from their awareness of the irreconcilable cleavage between human aspirations and their actualization. This did not prevent them, however, from frantically experimenting with pushing the buttons of social transformation, but that pessimism estranged them from the optimistic and much narrower minds of the simple communist militants.²¹

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