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The safe haven of a new classicism: the quest for a new aesthetics in Hungary 1904–1912

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Abstract Seen through the quest for a new metaphysics, the visual arts were interpreted in the framework of the particular sense of progress that the generation of György Lukács developed in the first decade of the twentieth century. They saw Impressionism as the veritable symptom of the deficiencies of their age and dreamed of a great, solid, lasting new Hungarian culture which would transcend the fragmentariness, sociological interests, and ethereality of Impressionism. Although exhibitions of contemporary modernist art were organized in Budapest and the Nagybánya artists' colony was in contact with the living French art, the nascent aesthetic theory, first of all that of Lukács, based the appreciation of Post-Impressionism on ideological considerations rather than the artistic particularities of the artists. Central to this aesthetic was the notion of greatness and a sense of metaphysics derived from German idealist philosophy and applied to the art of Cézanne, Gauguin, and the Budapest group *The Seekers* (founded in 1909, renamed, in 1911, as *The Eight*), all of whom were appreciated for features pointing in the direction of a new Classicism.

Keywords György Lukács · Leó Popper · Lajos Fülep · Béla Balázs · Visual arts · Impressionism · Cézanne · Gauguin · New Classicism

"This is my conviction," Walter Benjamin wrote in a letter in 1917, "Anyone who does not sense in Kant the struggle to *conceive doctrine itself* and who therefore does not comprehend him with the utmost *reverence* … knows nothing of philosophy. Thus all adverse criticism of his philosophical style is also pure

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philistinism and *profane* gibberish."[1] Whereupon Marjorie Perloff, who quotes Benjamin's letter, wryly points out: "Conviction, doctrine, reverence, the profane: this is the vocabulary of devotional writing."[2]

If Benjamin, the disciplined Marxist struggled to "conceive doctrine itself," which would be the opposite of the "profane," his (non-Marxist) Hungarian counterparts aspired to conceive an entirely new culture the anticipation of which hardly made their language less devotional. The writer Béla Balázs (1884–1949) confided to his diary more than a decade earlier his secret dreams of a great new Hungarian culture that he and his friends were born to create, which would be nothing less than a

> *spiritual rebirth* which would *cleanse* the present of its journalistic art and clownish science and would build in its place a fresh new art, a new science, a great new culture ... [it would be] the *religion* of art, which forms the basis of the future culture. Its *temple* would be the concert hall, the art gallery, and the theater. I spoke [to Zoltán Kodály] of the *redeeming power* of art, that people will improve and society once again will become healthy.[3]

The vision of this new Hungarian culture was vaguely modeled on German metaphysical philosophies. In his 1908 essay on Novalis,[4] György Lukács depicted the German Romantics—although the critique of Romanticism was, as he pointed out in a letter, central to him[5]—exactly as he saw his own generation: a youth which finds that the task cut out for them is nothing less than the creation or the fostering of a new faith. Talking about the young Germans of the late eighteenth century, Lukács clearly represented the Budapest idealists—his circle of friends—as a tragic generation under the spell of the great dream to overcome the limitations of rationalism and create a new culture of poetic sensibility, which would grow out of the profundity of the soul. Novalis and his friends, very much like Lukács himself and his own circle of friends, wanted to "build an invisible temple", because "a new religion wants to be born, a pantheistic, evolution-worshiping, natural sciences-bound religion where all difference between so-called material and spirit would be eliminated."[6] The Romantics, he said, were Kant's most devoted audience, and they

[1] Letter of Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, eds: *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, English translation by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 18, 117. Quoted by Marjorie Perloff: *The Vienna Paradox. A Memoir*, New York: New Directions Books, 2004, p. 81. Her emphases.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Balázs Béla: *Napló 1903–1914* (Diary, 1903–1914). August 22, 1916. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1982, pp. 219–220, my emphases. English translation in Mary Gluck: *Georg Lukács and His Generation*, Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 138.

[4] Lukács György: "Novalis. Jegyzetek a romantikus életfilozófiáról" (Novalis. Notes on the romantic philosophy of life), *Nyugat*, March 1908, Vol. I. No. 6, pp. 313–324, *A lélek és a formák*, pp. 83–101, Reprinted in Tímár Árpád, ed.: Lukács György: *Ifjúkori művek (1902–1918)*, Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1977, pp. 130–143;. Hereafter referred to as IM. My translation.

[5] Lukács György: Levél Popper Leónak, 1909 okt. 27, in Ottó Hévizi and Árpád Tímár, eds.: *Dialógus a művészetről. Popper Leó írásai. Popper Leó és Lukács György levelezése* (Dialogue about art. The writings of Leo Popper. The correspondence of Leo Popper and *György Lukács*). Hereafter referred to as: Popper, Budapest: MTA Lukács Archívum,T-Twins Kiadó, 1993, pp. 223, 302.

[6] "Novalis", in IM, p. 134.

knew that prior to creating a new religion, they had to create their ethics and mythology, which crystallized around *greatness* and the genius. These *great* poets and *great* men (my emphases) “admitted to being the founders of a new religion,”[7] and were inspired by “the great dream of the Golden Age.”[8] Balázs, too, persisted in this idea: in 1911 he wrote a letter to his friend Anna Lesznai (1885–1966), where he relates that “we may well found a new religion ... (I was not smiling when I wrote this down).”[9]

The language that Perloff calls ‘devotional’ permeated most of the essays of the young Lukács, Balázs, and Lajos Fülep (1885–1970). Exalted, subjective, and compelling, this language provided the *form* of their thoughts which needed a vehicle of such high intensity in order to transcend the spiritual pettiness of the present. Lukács’s choice to study aesthetics and focus on what is essential and timeless in the art work, as opposed to literary history is consistent with this inspired language. He needed to be “free of historical particularity,” as Lee Congdon put it,[10] rather than limited to literary history, which combines aesthetics and sociology, examining the historical and social context from which a literary work originates. Lukács embarked on studying what is quintessential rather than historical in the literary work, and he also tried to grasp the essential qualities of the visual arts, which were part of the broader, complete, but as yet hypothetical philosophical system he was working on. As he said in the “Lecture about Painting,”[11] he saw painting outside a “broad, all-encompassing system” of philosophical aesthetics. But, even in the absence of such a systematic context, he considered the artwork, as all artworks, a “totality, which is completely harmonious and closed” in and by itself.[12] He examined the artwork as a utopian and quintessentially metaphysical entity, a universe “based on the fiction that our inner world may be expressed by the outer world,”[13] which the painting represents. He was not concerned with technical or textural details: he referred to himself not as an art critic or art historian, but as a *philosopher of art*.[14]

Like many of his contemporaries, Lukács scorned impressionism for having shortchanged the higher and deeper level of reality for the rendering of instantaneous sensations and relative “sociological contents”;[15] and falling for the eventful surface rather than revealing “the highest level of objectivity.”[16]

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., p. 136.

[9] Balázs: letter to Anna Lesznai, Morges, Aug. 17, 1911, *Napló*, p. 505.

[10] Lee Congdon: *The Young Lukács*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, p. 26.

[11] Lukács: “Előadás a festészetről” (Lecture about painting, n.d.) IM pp. 807–821.

[12] Ibid., p. 809.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Lukács’s own statement is quoted by Arnold Hauser in a 1975 interview with Kristóf Nyíri, in: Éva Karádi and Erzsébet Vezér, eds.: *A vasárnapi kör*, Budapest: Gondolat, 1980, p. 63.

[15] “Lecture about Painting”, ibid., p. 815.

[16] Ibid.

His studies with philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel, "the most interesting transitional phenomenon in the entire modern philosophy,"[17] between 1906 and 1910 greatly influenced him. Simmel approached the isolation and alienation of modern man from the combined viewpoints of theory and sociology, and concluded, like Marx, that alienation is inherent in capitalism as a consequence of the division of labor, but he also saw that it makes human life in this system tragically determined. The great difference between German idealism and the pragmatic inquiry of sociology, along with Lukács's quest for ultimate metaphysical truth led him to enhance in Simmel the sensitivity to the tragic, rather than emphasis on sociology.

Lukács's early views on art and culture, which made a great impact on his peers, have been generating incessant, sustained interest because, among other important reasons, their close examination promises something like the close observation of a photograph: the sighting of the tipping point between two incompatible dimensions. In the photo it is the split second between being and non-being: nature or a person caught frozen in an unchangeable image; while in Lukács's early work it is the tipping point between being an idealist steeped in German metaphysical philosophy and becoming a committed Marxist and Bolshevik in 1918. What the early texts can be still expected to reveal includes: Was this a transformation? Did he trade freedom for indoctrination, or did he switch from one indoctrination to another? Was he a conservative turned radical, a radical turned conservative, or was he a conservative who changed colors? If he was a conservative by inclination, was it in his character or was his conservatism sociologically motivated or determined? Or both?

These questions have been examined by excellent thinkers; but this paper has the modest aim of examining them in the light of some of Lukács's and his friends' views of the visual arts. In the case of Lukács this is a challenging task, because this field was the least known and understood by him.[18] But precisely for this reason his utterances on the fine arts might be ideologically more transparent, as they are based neither on firm, detailed knowledge, nor personal involvement.

Yes, Lukács's generation revolted against the Anglo-Saxon-oriented pragmatism of their fathers, and the scientific approach of the sociologists of the Oszkár Jászi-edited *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century)[19] who believed in the impartial, methodological examination of society. They turned inward, to German metaphysics, which they admired, and to German culture where they found the starting kit for their ideas, vocabulary, and terminology.

Balázs as well as Lukács happened to have mothers whose mother tongue was German, and they both grew up, like many young people in their social class, bilingual in the midst of the political and cultural liberalism of the 1890s, that is, post-1867 Hungary of the *Gründerzeit* after the Compromise with the Habsburgs. Their parents, assimilated secular Jews, were intent to see them grow up educated.

[17] Lukács: "Georg Simmel", *Pester Lloyd*, Oct. 2, 1918, IM p. 746, my translation.

[18] I say this in spite of the excellent study of Árpád Tímár, „The Young Lukács and the Fine Arts," *Acta Historiae Artium*, Tomus 34, 1989, pp. 29–39, in which the author gives ample evidence of Lukács's familiarity with the visual arts. This article discusses some of the particularities of this.

[19] *Twentieth Century*, a journal in social sciences launched in Budapest, 1900.

Balázs came from a rather modest although highly cultured background—his father, a high-school teacher translated Kant[20]—but Lukács's father, the son of a quilt maker who was almost illiterate, exploited the great possibilities that the new Dual Monarchy and the rapidly developing Hungarian capital offered, and made a spectacular career as a banker, earning not only a fortune but also the title of baron. His family belonged to that new urban upper crust of the Monarchy which was referred to as the *Bildungsbürgertum*: the mostly Jewish upper class, which put their hope of social integration and assimilation into education. The uniting power that in the German context the historian Wolfgang Benz called being "German by the grace of Goethe"[21] was, in Hungary, the dream of creating—along with the new prosperity of the country—a great new Hungarian culture, which, as a redemption of sorts, would be all-inclusive. Devotion to it would be the only relevant condition of being part of it; questions of ethnic or religious backgrounds would be irrelevant.

Thorough knowledge of German literature, art, and philosophy was the condition for participating in the discourse which mattered most to the young Budapest intellectuals. They too were Europeans "by the grace of Goethe."[22] There was no Hungarian philosophy or philosophical language, so they did not have a choice: following from their education and disposition, any great new philosophy of the future had to be modeled on the German example.

The straight line of upward social mobility, along with the rationalism of liberal thinking and economic prosperity did not meet with the desires and ambitions of the generation born in the mid- and late 1880s. Lukács, Balázs, the philosopher and art critic Lajos Fülep, (one of the few non-Jewish members of the group) the artist, critic and essayist Leo Popper (1886–1911), the poet and artist Anna Lesznai, as well as their other friends were disenchanted with the shallow materialism of their world. They were passionate and eager to find more in life than disengaged science and social theories marked by positivism. They blamed their discontents and sense of tragic detachment on the fragmented world view that rationalism offered, and intuited that the isolation and alienation they suffered resulted from the lack of an overarching philosophy or religion.

The assimilation of Jews in Hungary, which was a given for them, was not as smooth as it appeared to some of these young people—although Balázs, for example, suffered deeply in his childhood for not fitting in entirely with his *Magyar* classmates. The social tension which inevitably developed with capitalism in post-1867 Hungary inspired the impoverishing classes, first of all the gentry—the lower nobility—to blame their loss of wealth and social influence on the Jews. This ideology was also embraced by the genuinely poor classes. Győző Istóczy gave the first anti-Semitic speech in the Hungarian Parliament in 1875, and founded the Anti-Semitic Party which won 17 seats in 1884. The lectures of the highly esteemed liberal philosopher of law Gyula Pikler, the respected teacher of Oszkár Jászi, were disturbed at the Budapest University in 1907 by right wing students who rejected his theory of social evolution in the name of noble privilege and the sanctity of the

[20] I am thankful to Sándor Radnóti for this information.

[21] "Deutsche von Goethes Gnaden," Quoted by Perloff, p. 80.

[22] Not only symbolically: Balázs literally identified with Goethe, see his *Napló*, pp. 139–140.

fatherland. They entered Pikler's classroom with the aim of making it impossible for him to deliver his lecture.[23] Although this incident was settled, the radicalization of the university students was unmistakable. As Mary Gluck observed,

> During the first decade of the twentieth century, when Lukács and his friends were attending the University of Budapest, the atmosphere of the university, and, to a lesser extent, the entire country, had become so radicalized that maintaining a moderate posture based on the old national-liberal ideology became a practical impossibility for most young Hungarian intellectuals. The question, thus, was not whether Lukács and his friends would become radicalized but rather what form their radicalism would assume.[24]

Their first answer pointed in the direction of modernizing Hungarian culture: it followed from their social position, education, and limited historical experience that they idealistically believed in the power of culture in the shaping of society. To this end, in 1904 Lukács and his friends László Bánóczi (1884–1945) and Marcell Benedek (1886–1969) organized the *Thália Society* with a membership of ca. 30, including Béla Balázs, composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), and eventually Sándor Hevesi (1873–1939), assistant director of the National Theater, in order to introduce the Hungarian audience to modern European dramas. On the one hand, it was about widening the horizon of the Budapest public by staging Ibsen, Wedekind, Gorky, and other contemporary authors' plays; on the other hand, the *Thália* was fuelled by Lukács's fascination with drama as a genre rooted in the innermost spirit of an age ("No solitary writer has yet created a new dramatic form,"[25] he wrote), and his overwhelming involvement with issues of "tragic fate" which pervaded his early essays. 'Fate' and 'necessity' were quasi-religious concepts, directed against the faithless pragmatism of their time. The *Thália*, as he later wrote, brought forth those plays which expressed the *Weltgefühl* of his generation: it gave voice "to the tragic fate which recognizes the futility of everything; the necessary imperfection of all knowledge; the eternal estrangement of people from one another."[26] Lukács's inquiry concerned the age he was living in; the *Zeitgeist* as such, rather than just his own historical age. He was intent to detect fate in the spirit of an age; the fateful determination it had for its children which can be, he was convinced, best represented in drama, where the individuals fight against that obscure but powerful command. He was writing an ambitious and inquisitive work, the first version of *History of the Evolution of Modern Drama*.

The visual arts were, naturally, part of his inquiry. His hypothetical concept that it takes a great age to produce great art was apparently proved by the fine arts of classical antiquity and the Renaissance where the visible motives and their regulated compositions—the *disegno*—arguably stood for a clear system of underlying ideas.

[23] See more on the "Pikler affaire" in Gluck, pp. 61–62.

[24] Ibid. p. 62.

[25] György Lukács: "The Main Directions of Dramaturgy during the Final Quarter of the Last Century," quoted, after Éva Fekete, by Lee Congdon, p. 23.

[26] György Lukács: "Thália Rediviva", *Huszadik Század*, Vol. 9, No. 11 (1908), IM pp. 179–180; quoted in English translation by Gluck, p. 63.

By contrast, as already mentioned, he and his friends saw Impressionism as the embodiment and the symptom of the unproblematic shallowness of their age, lacking and even rejecting metaphysics: in short, the failure of their culture.

Upon first encountering Impressionism though, Fülep, who worked as a professional art critic since 1904, celebrated it as the assertion of individual freedom and revolt against the Academy and conservatism which he lampooned in vitriolic articles. But Fülep soon concurred with Lukács in realizing that the main enemy was not conservatism, and the fundamental problem was not the emptiness and the authoritative and politically oppressive nature of academism and tradition, but the overall falling apart of what they thought had once been a coherent world held together by higher ideas and principles. The idea of a once whole world was a concept they never challenged, and their lively interest in—indeed, the cult of—myths, fairy tales and folk art originated from this notion. Besides these they looked at Egyptian antiquity and archaic Greek art as the materialization of the will of a whole people sharing an all-encompassing idea empowering them to create a consistent signature style, which is why their art could be re-discovered by the equally 'collective' later cultures of the European past. "The early Renaissance found not personalities, but style in this layer of antiquity," Fülep wrote in 1908 in his article "New Style in Art."[27] The culture of the present, said Fülep, agreeing with Lukács, featured the isolation of the individual, who, even if attempting to build a new world, cannot rely on anything else than his own vulnerable and detached self. Fülep pointed out that there was a theoretical contradiction between the detachment and relativity of the individual artist and the aspiration of the art work to "solidity, eternity, and general validity,"[28] which spelled out their general conviction that in present circumstances no great art was possible. Lukács, who was re-writing his *History of the Evolution of Modern Drama* at the time, was also skeptical at best about this possibility: great art can only be born in a great age.

Lukács found a possible response of a great man who missed a great age in Paul Gauguin's gesture—not his paintings which he hardly discussed and considered overrated[29]—of leaving Western civilization behind altogether. In a 1907 article on Gauguin that he wrote on the occasion of an exhibition of Post-Impressionists at the *Nemzeti Szalon* in Budapest, he interpreted Gauguin's choice to settle in Tahiti as "the possibility of a harmonious solution for a tragic situation," although a one-time and personal solution only; and as "a quest for style, … simplicity and synthesis," which "restored his place in society."[30] Gauguin, he said, was "seeking harmony in art first," but in Tahiti "he found it in life."[31]

[27] Lajos Fülep: "Új művészeti stílus" (New style in art), *Új Szemle*, 1908 March 1, March 15, Apr. 1. Reprinted in Fülep: *A művészet forradalmától a nagy forradalomig. Cikkek, tanulmányok* (From the revolution of art to the great revolution. Articles, essays) Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1974, pp. 484–516; p. 488, my translation.

[28] Ibid., p. 487.

[29] Lukács György: „Gauguin", *Huszadik Század*, 1907 jún. Vol. VIII., No. 6, pp. 559–562. Reprinted in IM, pp. 111–115, p. 111.

[30] IM ibid., p. 114, my translation.

[31] IM ibid., p. 115.

The quintessential problem of modern painting was, as Lukács pointed out in this article, the dubious impact of the liberation of art from all collective frameworks: ideational contents, symbols, even the tyranny of a sponsor. Freedom isolated art, every decision in its making depending on the painter's will only. In the absence of tradition and consensus with regard to the forms and contents of art,

> the relationship between the artist and the public will be determined by individual thinking only, and the possibility to express ideas in painting becomes problematic. ... We have no culture any more where the same instinct would suggest to us what kind of clothes, furniture, and pictures we need: the anarchy is complete.[32]

Lukács, who was, beneath his metaphysical leanings, a rationalist who abhorred chaos, claimed that not only has the present anarchy left the artist on his own; it has lowered the public's expectations, too. People willingly understood that the artist also needs to earn money and has got to shape his art with this in mind, including the requirement to be original, because "in modern art only originality is appreciated as artistic"[33]—unlike the art of the past where the grip of solid tradition made the idea of originality irrelevant.

Gauguin, Lukács suggested, was the great exception, although an "isolated … wonderful illusion" only, because in Tahiti he "had a place in society, and he was loved and happy." "He painted that intense happiness and harmony" in his last paintings, which he found down there in the South Sea, thus becoming "the only modern artist who achieved his goal."[34]

While aesthetics is "free of historical particularity," its validity hinges on the accuracy of the historical facts it transcends. Lukács, in this case, glossed over or ignored concrete facts of reality in order to fit Gauguin's controversial achievement in life and art into his metaphysical philosophy, and use it to demonstrate the *necessity* of the quest for style, simplicity, synthesis, and the rejection of the culture of the present.

But in fact Gauguin did not quite fit into Lukács's theory. Paradoxically, while his final summary of painting and thinking—his fresco-like three-part (although one piece) 1897–1898 composition *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*—points in the direction of Lukács's thoughts, because it *was* an achievement, and his ultimate one at that, it was not at all the image of happiness and harmony found upon leaving the West. Rather, it could be compared to Balázs's 1907 *Death Aesthetics*, representing life and art as framed by death, and all its meaning gained from the fact of death. In fact Gauguin, ill, confused and desperate, and having lost his favorite daughter to tuberculosis, attempted suicide immediately upon completing this painting. As he wrote in a letter to a friend, he "took himself

[32] Ibid., p. 112.

[33] Ibid., p. 113. Cf. Leo Popper's undated fragmentary notes, "In Matisse's school a new secret trick is invented every day" in order to provide novelty, in Ottó Hévizi and Árpád Tímár, eds.: *Dialógus a művészetről. Popper Leó írásai. Popper Leó és Lukács György levelezése*, hereafter referred to as Popper, p. 223.

[34] ibid., p. 115.

up into the mountains, swallowed a large dose of arsenic, and waited to die."[35] The attempt failed, and after terrible pains and suffering, Gauguin returned home. In her fine-tuned study of Gauguin's work Deborah Silverman points out that although

> previous scholars have rightly emphasized the mythic and metaphysical ambitions underlying Gauguin's attempts to produce such a masterpiece, [however,] ... evidence from Gauguin's writings and a drawing related to the painting provide compelling clues for the specificity of Catholicism in the painting's form, meaning and function.[36]

Silverman argues that in the end of his life Gauguin, although having repeatedly attacked the power structure of the Catholic Church, returned—indeed, regressed—to the spirit and the question-and-answer format of the catechism that he had studied in the seminary as a boy.

As far as the philosophy of his relocation in Tahiti is concerned, it was a more complex affair than making a bold statement on the condition of European culture as Lukács interpreted it. While the actual reason of his leaving remains obscure,[37] his 1891 trip was strategically planned and government-funded, in an effort on Gauguin's part to establish and even mythologize himself among the newly trendy Paris Symbolists and to ease his financial situation. He arranged, with the help of Stéphane Mallarmé, that the writer Octave Mirbeau would write an article about him, which was published a week before an advertised sale of Gauguin's paintings; a longer version of the article appeared three days later in *Le Figaro*; on the day of the sale an interview with Gauguin was published, and a few weeks later a celebratory article by poet and critic Albert Aurier appeared in *Mercure de France*.[38] Supported by this campaign, Gauguin was successfully soliciting official support for his trip "to study and ultimately paint the customs and landscapes of Tahiti", so he left on April 1, 1891 as, in Silverman's words, "both a visionary exile from civilization and an emissary of the French state."[39] Gauguin's planning and self-image-making are noteworthy because several of his contemporaries saw his various moves, including his famous declaration "*Je suis un sauvage*" as consciously casting himself in the role of the genuinely primitive artist in an effort to cater to the latest demands of the public. As his contemporary Camille Pissarro

[35] Gauguin: *Letters à de Monfried*, a letter of February 1898, quoted in Deborah Silverman: *Van Gogh and Gauguin. The Search for Sacred Art*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, p. 383.

[36] Ibid., p. 384.

[37] Unless we take Gauguin's letter to J. F. Willlumsen, written in Pont-Aven, dated Fall 1890, at face value: "I am going soon to Tahiti, a small island in Oceania, where the material necessities of life can be had without money… There at least, under an eternally summer sky, on a marvelously fertile soil, the Tahitian has only to lift his hands to gather his food; and in addition he never works. When in Europe men and women survive only after increasing labor during which they struggle in convulsions of cold and hunger, a prey to misery, the Tahitians, on the contrary, happy inhabitants of the unknown paradise of Oceania, know only sweetness of life…" (quoted in Herschel Chipp: *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1968, p. 79).

[38] For a more detailed description of Gauguin's organized campaign, see Silverman, pp. 375–378.

[39] Ibid., p. 377.

(who never liked Gauguin and thought he was a plagiarist) voiced his reservations in 1891:

> it is the sign of the times... The bourgeoisie, frightened, astonished by the immense clamor of the disinherited masses, by the insistent demands of the people, feels that it is necessary to restore to the people their superstitious beliefs. Hence the bustling of religious Symbolists, religious socialists, idealist art, occultism, Buddhism, etc. Gauguin has sensed the tendency.[40]

Cézanne, so often clumped together with Gauguin by Hungarian art critics, shared some of his friend Pissarro's opinion, and shortly before his death said of Gauguin that he was "parading his sensations before the public."[41]

Silverman's interpretation of Gauguin's late work and thinking reveals his return to Catholicism, which also raises questions about the authenticity of his primitivism, since the two are mutually exclusive.[42] Silverman points out that although Gauguin's appeal to the Symbolists was not due simply to "his deft skills at ... self promotion" because

> his art work and his persona struck deeper chords among the writers, with whom Gauguin shared basic philosophical and esthetic principles, ... the aspect of their mutual affinity is the shared framework of religious attitudes and language that shaped the critics' representation of Gauguin, and their formation, like the painter's, in the institutions and culture of French Catholicism.[43]

The reason why this perspective brings us back to Lukács and Fülep's "New Style in Art" essay is that another ideological, albeit celebratory article on Gauguin was authored by the painter and theorist Maurice Denis in 1890. Denis belonged to the Symbolist group most of whose members embraced Catholicism in the 1890s. He re-published his essay in *L'Occident* in May 1909—2 years after Lukács's Gauguin article but a year before his article on *The Seekers* to be discussed below—under the title "From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Neo-Classicism." Here he attempts to resolve the contradiction between the individual's capricious gestures in art—as Impressionism was seen by then—and the classical tradition which, he claims, blend in Symbolism, which is

[40] Quoted by Gill Perry: "The Going Away – a preparation for the Modern?" in Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, Gill Perry: *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction. The Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 32.

[41] Roger Fry: *Cézanne. Study of his Development*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1958, p. 1. First published in London, 1927.

[42] It has to be noted that the island of Tahiti was not as pristinely primitive as conceived in popular imagination. Many of its inhabitants converted to Catholicism, and there was a French bishop on the island with whom Gauguin did not get along.

[43] Ibid., p. 377; Silverman further relates that Mirbeau "in his seminal 1891 article emphasized the identification between Gauguin and Christ," as did Aurier in *Mercure de France;* this idea was promoted by Gauguin himself in some of his paintings e.g. *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, 1889, a self-portrait as Christ.

"far form being incompatible with the classical method," because it is "the basis for a very objective art and a very general and plastic language, even a classical art, [which] is the most subjective and the most subtle aspect of the human soul, the most mysterious spirit of pure inner life."[44]

But there is an underlying political message in his essay, since in 1909 Denis was a supporter of the extremist right-wing group *l'Action française*.[45] No wonder he sees in art an instrument of national education:

> If the youth of today manages to reject the negative systems which have organized art and aesthetics – and, simultaneously, French society and intelligence, they will find the truly contemporary elements of a classical restoration in our Synthetist or Symbolist views, in the rational interpretation of Cézanne and Gauguin.[46]

In a politically charged context like that in France or Hungary, art criticism and art theory could not withhold from putting art works in an ideational or ideological context, which did not always follow from the art works themselves. Ironically, for example, while Lukács celebrated Gauguin's secession from Western culture and his simple primitivist style as a bold and rebellious gesture, Denis integrated Gauguin along with Cézanne, wholesale, into the "classical restoration" of French traditionalism, reconciling with one stroke rationalism and "the most mysterious spirit of pure inner life" in their life and work.

Lukács, Fülep, Popper and their friends were seeking a new, yet to be created *future* system of metaphysical ideas—even if this future art would bring back the glory of the classical—that would lead the world again to a great new age of culture, sensitivity and sensibility, which they saw heralded in the work of Gauguin and Cézanne. Denis, however, driven by the same ambition to restore a homogenous culture, pointed to the *past* indicating Catholicism (plus patriotism) as the guiding spirit of the new times, claiming that it was adequately represented by the simplicity of Gauguin's and Cézanne's, as well as the Symbolists', works. The difference between Denis's view and Lukács's celebration of the 'the old in the new' a year later, as I will point out, was that Denis clearly spoke about the 'restoration' of the age-old religion whereas Lukács posited the old values as the features of the new, vanguard art.

In a footnote to his article on Gauguin, Lukács mentioned Julius Meier-Graefe's then widely read 1902 book, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Malerei* (The history of the development of modern art, published in New York in 1908 as *The Mediums of Art, Past and Present*), a rant against the "vulgarization" of art since it has been dissociated from religious worship and has become the object of obscene and absurd hoarding and trading. Although he did not adopt the German art critic's sociological approach, Lukács's aforementioned critique of the new-found

[44] Maurice Denis: "From Gauguin and van Gogh to Neo-Classicism," *L'Occident*, Paris, May 1909, reprinted in English translation in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds.: *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, Oxford UK, Cambridge Mass., Blackwell, 1992, pp. 47–53.

[45] cf. Gill Perry, p. 32.

[46] Denis, in Harrison and Wood, p. 51.

'freedom' of art which he saw as isolation, ever since art has become detached from cultic architecture, may have been inspired by Meier-Graefe's thoughts.

The reason why Gauguin's, and in particular Cézanne's, art was intensely discussed in Budapest was not only the increasing prominence of the Hungarian Neo-Impressionists at the Nagybánya[47] artists' colony in 1905–1906, and the emergence in 1909 of a new group of artists—*The Seekers*, later renamed *The Eight*—which programmatically stepped out against Impressionism. It was also due to a flurry of activity among art critics—György Bölöni, Artúr Bárdos, Ignotus, Géza Feleky, Arnold Hauser, and others (some of them literary critics who thought it important to make a statement on the emerging, progressive Hungarian art)—who welcomed in the new group the emancipation of Hungarian painting to the latest European achievements, and ranked the new artists with French Post-Impressionists like Cézanne or Gauguin. Hauser also pointed out that the new artists came out, in painting, against the anarchy of individualism as did Lukács in theory and Mihály Babits, poet and co-editor of *Nyugat* [West], in poetry.[48] Lukács's commitment to create a new metaphysics and his search for evidence of its necessity in the visual arts as well was instrumental in putting this art center-stage. Lukács's primary interest was not the sensual encounter with the art works, but the proof of their theoretical inevitability. That is why, among other things, he approved of the *existence* of this new, non-Impressionist art. The term 'Post-Impressionist' was to be coined by Roger Fry in London later in 1910, but the new art of *The Seekers* showed that the general direction, the mainstream spiritual trend of the age was the transcendence of the materialist and individualist art of Impressionism.

Recent research has directed attention to the Nagybánya artists as having been more progressive, particularly around 1905–1906 and 1910, than *The Seekers.* Kernstok's group represented a sort of disciplined, moderately expressive version of cubist constructions, but in many paintings, particularly those of Bertalan Pór and Kernstok, visions of an Arcadia appeared in the painterly language of a new classicism. It is conspicuous that Lukács was neither aware nor interested in the Nagybánya developments, although Irma Seidler, his close friend and first romantic love with whom he corresponded at the time, moved to the Nagybánya colony to study and practice painting.

Discussion of the visual arts or the development of a new aesthetics based on the fine arts in Hungary was complicated by several factors. Modern art had a history of a mere decade and a half by 1909–1910; there was hardly any public which had a clue to modern art—the educated were better versed in literature, which was considered the backbone of the culture; art criticism was a nascent genre which, like new art, had yet to find its audience;[49] and it was impossible to create an invigorating discourse about modern Hungarian art, because it was too obscure.

[47] Presently Baniu Mare, Romania.

[48] Arnold Hauser: "Babits Mihály költészete, vagy az objektivitás a lírában" (The poetry of Mihály Babits, or objectivity lyricism), *Temesvári Hírlap*, 1911; quoted by Árpád Tímár: „Élmény és teória" (Experience and theory) in *Lehetséges-e egyáltalán? Márkus Györgynek—tanítványai* (Is it possible at all? To György Márkus—his students), Budapest: Atlantisz, 1994, p. 428.

[49] In his critique of Hungarian art criticism Fülep wrote in 1906: „Controlling art criticism is not the job of one person or even ten persons, but of an intellectually mature society. Where do we find that?" (Fra

Authors had to address the questions of contemporary art in general, frequently paralleling the artists of the present with the classics who were somewhat better known, but even such a discourse could resonate only with a readership familiar with and caring for the contemporary art scene: a thin upper crust of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, although every statement on the art of the present or the recent past was meant to relate to both the European and the Hungarian context, there were more than two decades of time lag between the two. In 1896, when the Nagybánya artists started to paint *plein air* pictures, that is, to apply an early, tempered mode of Impressionism, Impressionism was already part of the salon art in France, and such groundbreaking Post-Impressionists as Georges Seurat and Vincent van Gogh had already been dead for half a decade.

In Hungary Cézanne *and* Gauguin were discussed with a sense of immediacy, as the most significant painters of the age, whose painting had relevance for the Hungarian cultural scene. This is a problematic pairing, ideological rather than aesthetic first of all, because their styles of art—Cézanne's structured solid sense of materiality and Gauguin's flat, contoured decorative style—had hardly anything in common. The only bond between them may have been their mutual rejection of Impressionism. As a later published Cézanne letter indicates, he himself utterly disliked both Gauguin and van Gogh. In letter of April 15, 1904, he advised Emile Bernard: "You have the understanding of what must be done and you will soon turn your back on the Gauguins and the van Goghs!"[50]

Discussion of the art of Cézanne and Gauguin as remedy for the culture of Impressionism in Hungary also entailed that as far as alienation, loss of values, cultural anarchy, and the absence of metaphysics were concerned, there was no difference between Hungary and the rest of Europe. "There is no time, there are no ages, there is no distance," Lajos Fülep wrote about Cézanne and Gauguin in an article[51] discussing their paintings, but glorified their simplicity and 'primitivism', which he summarily compared to the artist who, in the parlance of that time, was the epitome of greatness and the undisputed, ultimate authority: Giotto.

Reading several of Fülep's articles on Cézanne one understands that everything he said about the great figures of European art was a message addressed to the Hungarian artists, art critics, and art public. In his obituary he compared Cézanne to such masters as Michelangelo, Van Eyck, Titian, and Rembrandt, making it clear that he meant greatness rather than a specific style to be the bond among them. He put Cézanne on a pedestal in an attempt to set an example to Hungarians and urge them to stand up to the same ideals that the French Post-Impressionist represented. *Declaring* Cézanne to be the greatest artist of the era in an exalted, emotionally extravagant style of writing was also an ideologically charged attitude that was meant to inspire and shake up fellow Hungarians. It was very much unlike, for example, the English art critic Clive Bell, who expressed his equally high opinion of

Footnote 49 continued
Filippo, pen name of Lajos Fülep: „A magyar műkritika", or Hungarian art criticism, in: *Magyar Szemle*, 1906, No. 33), my translation.

[50] In Herschel Chipp, p. 19.

[51] Lajos Fülep: „Cézanne és Gauguin", *A Hét*, May 12 1907, reprinted in Fülep, as in Note #13, p. 454.

Cézanne simply by saying that his "perfection [lied in] simplification I don't understand …simplification and plastic design".[52] In an equally anti-mythologizing way artist and art critic Roger Fry wrote in the same catalogue of the Post-Impressionists' 1912 exhibition in London that "most of the art seen here is neither naïve nor primitive. It is the work of highly civilized and modern men trying to find a pictorial language appropriate to the sensibilities of the modern outlook."[53] However, the feature that Maurice Denis called 'rationalism' and 'purity', Fülep considered 'primitive', and Lukács "the old art ... of order and values," was not lost on Fry. Discussing a group of French Post-Impressionists, including, besides Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso (the last of whom the Hungarians almost ignored), he underlined "a distinctive characteristic of the French artists seen here, namely, the markedly Classic spirit of their work. ... I mean that they do not rely for their effect upon associated ideas, as I believe Romantic and Realist artists invariably do."[54] This concept squared with Lukács's principle of examining form free of the 'associated' contents in literary works, the latter being historical and getting easily obfuscated for later readers;[55] therefore "the more closely a work … approximated 'pure form', the greater and more universal it became."[56]

However, while the English critics' inquiry was impartially professional, intent to clarify—for a public just as prejudiced as the Hungarian—the nature and the reasons of the effectiveness of the French Post-Impressionists and the nuts and bolts of their work, the Hungarian aestheticians assumed a different task. They pointed out an underlying, superior *Weltanschauung* in these paintings, and embraced this art, the very existence of which, they believed, was a strong argument against the superficial culture of liberalism and positivism. Maybe for the clarity of the arguments, the praise of Post-Impressionism in Hungary was limited to Cézanne and very few other masters: mostly Gauguin, and occasionally van Gogh. Mention and interpretation of Matisse were scarce and often negative,[57] and such contemporary figures as Picasso, or, in nearby Vienna: Egon Schiele or Oskar Kokoschka, to give but a few examples, were hardly or not at all noticed, let alone the German Expressionists of the *Die Brücke* group (founded in 1905), whose art was, in fact, closer to Lukács's concepts on art than to his taste, since they had equally been inspired by Post-Impressionists, mostly Gauguin and Van Gogh.

But Lukács's passion was reserved for the drama and the novel. Throughout his extended stays in Germany in his youth he was an enthusiastic theatergoer and an avid reader, but seems to have visited exhibitions out of a sense of duty without enjoying them. In a very early article which he wrote when he was just 17,[58] he gave an account

[52] Clive Bell: "The English Group", preface to the catalogue *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, London, Oct. 5–Dec. 31, 1912, London: Ballantyne & Company Ltd., p. 22.

[53] Roger Fry: "The French Group", ibid., p. 26.

[54] Ibid., p. 28; In other writings on Post-Impressionism Fry considered Gauguin to be an 'associative' artist, lacking the 'Classic spirit' of those mentioned above.

[55] See a detailed analysis in Congdon, p. 26.

[56] Ibid.

[57] As in Popper, ibid., pp. 80, 148, etc.

[58] Lukács: "Berlin júliusban" (Berlin in July), *Magyarság*, 1902, reprinted in IM pp. 15–19.

of the art he saw in Berlin: the Impressionist Max Liebermann, whom he recognized for the 'associative' contents of his paintings; Max Klinger, whom he praised for reaching back to classic art, notably Egyptian painted sculpture; and the Norwegian symbolist Edward Munch, whose art he confessed to "not understand." During his later stays in Germany he consistently eschewed familiarizing himself with emerging German modernism. While the great German cultural tradition was more profoundly enmeshed in his thinking and personality than anything else, he—as is evident from his later work—both conceptually and viscerally rejected the German expressionists. In fact, Lukács was arguably looking for classic clarity and monumentality which, for him, represented the metaphysical. This may have been due to the fact that the old masters were closer to metaphysics than the modern ones;[59] but it appears to me that their authority also weighed in for Lukács, who gave no sign of appreciating contemporary art which has not yet aged sufficiently to gain wide respect. He believed in the tradition of antiquity and the Renaissance, that is the central, mainstream narrative of European culture, and applied the standards of this tradition to later art and literature. He loathed what was marginal.[60]

He was more open to concepts than to sensual, concrete, visual artworks. "I am not an expert in the fine arts," he wrote to Popper in 1909, "I have no way of knowing how the opposition that I sense between epic and drama, Classicism and Romanticism, plays out there."[61] The emergence of the painters' group *The Seekers* made him enthusiastic because he could see in their program the opening of yet another frontline—along with the poetry of Endre Ady, the literary monthly *Nyugat*, and new music by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály—in the fight against Impressionism and bourgeois culture. *The Seekers* promised the re-birth of Hungarian painting in the spirit and language of Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists. Károly Kernstok (1873–1940), the leading figure of the group gave a programmatic talk in the *Galilei Circle*[62] in January 1910. A maverick on the Hungarian art scene, Kernstok confronted all artistic practices based on the copying of nature. Painting had to be processed through the intellect, he said: "It is not science we are seeking in painting, nor the play of feelings, but intellect in painting: disciplined human brainwork."[63]

This concept resonated with Lukács. He opened his supportive response to Kernstok's talk with the statement that "[the new pictures of the *Seekers*] express for the first time, clearly and unmistakably, a parting of ways,"[64] because their art

[59] I am thankful to Sándor Radnóti for this insight.

[60] Lukács said in an interview in the 1930s that Arnold Hauser and Karl Mannheim became marginal; that is, they did not get anywhere, because they had emigrated from Hungary. His distaste for Impressionism may have been related to the latter's episodic presence in European culture: a view that Roger Fry shared, too.

[61] Lukács György: Levél Popper Leónak, Oct. 27, 1909, in: Popper, p. 304, my translation.

[62] Radical student organization, founded in 1908.

[63] Kernstok Károly: „Kutató művészet" (Investigative art), *Nyugat*, 1910, I. pp. 95–99. English translation by János Bátki in BW, pp. 121–124; I have slightly modified his translation.

[64] Lukács: „Az utak elváltak" (The Ways Have Parted), *Nyugat* 1910, I. pp. 190–193, English Transl. John Bátki, in Timothy O. Benson, Éva Forgács, eds. *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930* (Hereafter referred to as BW), Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2002, pp. 125–129; p. 125.

belonged to a new tendency with a clearly anti-Impressionist stance. Lukács made clear that it was not the paintings that he would discuss, but "this parting and its causes and significance."[65] Drawing on Meier-Graefe and, more importantly, verbatim on the recent analysis that Leo Popper gave in his "Letter from Paris,"[66] he welcomed "these pictures which bring quiet, peace, calm and harmony," as "the resurrection of the old art …against the new, modern art."[67]

It is ironic of course that the long-awaited new art turns out to be the trusted old art. There is a glaring contradiction between Lukács's welcoming the latest art as adequate for the present age because it transcends yesterday's obsolete Impressionism, and welcoming it *as* the reincarnation of the old, pre-Impressionist art. Unlike Denis, who proudly restored the values of Catholicism, Lukács assumed the role of a progressive theorist. The contradiction is rooted in the politicizing of the event: if the painting of *The Seekers* is radically progressive vanguard art, how can it be celebrated by a progressive theorist for standing for the *old*? A fine-tuned explanation of why the classics could be regarded as more modern than the new art was possible in art theory or essay writing only. That is why Popper's 1909 analysis of the current tendencies in art did not imply any contradiction. His insights were made from the disinterested position of an observer:

> The way of today's painting leads towards peace and quiet, and out of the stylistic chaos of Impressionism towards an art of silence on solid ground, which has to be, no matter how it will manifest itself, akin to architecture, that frozen music; and it should bear the depth, self-assuredness, and balance that architecture embodies. And the old order: the still or dynamic, sacred order of the ancient Greeks and the peoples of the Orient will return through hidden paths.[68]

Lukács, committed to, and struggling for, the recognition of the new group in Budapest, sided with *The Seekers* in a talk which he gave in their support, in particular, Kernstok. In this political battle he had to argue that they and only they owned the *truth*:

> Today once again we long for order among things. We long for permanence, for our deeds to be measurable, for our statements to be unequivocal and verifiable ... This art is *the old art*, the art of order and values, the art of the constructed. Impressionism turned everything into decorative surface ... The new art is architectonic in the old and true sense" (my emphasis).[69]

But once he offered ideological support, he had to go all the way and draw the strategic consequences of his attitude, which resulted in militant rhetoric. This was

[65] Ibid.

[66] Leo Popper: Párizsi levél (Letter fom Paris), Feb. 1909, in Popper, p. 80.

[67] Lukács, BW p. 126.

[68] Popper, ibid.

[69] Lukács: „Az utak elváltak" (The Ways Have Parted), talk in the *Galilei Circle*, and published in *Nyugat* 1910, I. pp. 190–193, English Transl. John Bátki BW, p. 128.

not the voice of an aesthetician who is examining the immanent value of art, but that of a leader and moral arbiter:

> This art of order must destroy all the anarchy and sensation and mood. The mere appearance and existence of this art is a declaration of war. It is a declaration of war on all Impressionism, all sensation and mood, all disorder and denial of values, every *Weltanschauung* and art which writes 'I' as its first and last word.[70]

Popper, who enjoyed his friend's new-found temper and "bellicosity" for the sake of "a good cause," did not omit to express his hope, nevertheless, that Lukács would not continue this kind of activity. "I am not worried, because I know your strict acknowledgment of boundaries," he wrote, "and that you agree with me that one can give but the broadest account of such a topic only, with which one is perfectly familiar, down to the smallest details."[71]

Promising to become the most convincing and compelling art critic, essayist, and theorist of the first decade of the twentieth century, Popper generated a rich panoply of ideas in his short life. He could have become in Hungary the slightly eccentric trend-setter artist and critic that Roger Fry became in London. He wrote mostly art reviews with all the passion of love, hatred, or disgust that the art works generated in him; but his visceral responses were unfailingly controlled by an extraordinarily sharp and bright mind. He mastered an idiosyncratic, powerful, and expressive language, as well as an original, personal approach to art.

The son of a musician and music teacher, Popper studied to be a violinist, but switched to painting. He attended, as much as his tuberculosis-ridden body permitted, art classes in Paris, and showed talent for drawing and painting.

Although he also anticipated the coming of a Neo-Classicism—the "art of silence based on solid ground,"[72] fundamentally sharing Lukács's views, he was diametrically opposed to the latter in method, approach, and disposition. When he predicted that a "tectonic art" would eventually replace the all-dissolving "stylistic chaos"[73] of Impressionism, he did not arrive at this conviction or intuition through theory or on the basis of a *Weltanschauung*. Although Riegl's concepts of the contrast between *optisch* and *haptisch*, the optical and the plastic (or haptic), may have been on his mind, he came to his conclusions on the basis of direct sensual experience. He experienced, recognized, and felt this dynamics to be inherent in the visual arts, and he presciently realized that Impressionism, the total dissolution of painting in ethereal optical effects, would engender its opposite, the "tectonic" art of the future.[74]

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[70] Ibid., p. 125.

[71] Popper, Letter to Lukács, Berlin, Feb. 6, 1910; in Popper, p. 328, my translation.

[72] Leo Popper: Letter from Paris, in Popper: ibid., p. 80. He was proved right: The Constructivism of the 1920s was exactly the art he had predicted.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Popper, p. 328.

He admired the nascent art of solidity, plasticity and weight—particularly the sculpture of Aristide Maillol—for its understanding of the profound forces of nature to be worked *with* rather than against as, in his view, Rodin did when he created impressionistic painterly surfaces on his sculptures.

Since Popper was not only erudite and passionately interested in every kind of art, but also able to combine his knowledge with a kind of intimacy with visual art works, he always considered mankind's entire artistic legacy each time he examined a single work. He understood the artwork from the inside: he grasped the core, felt the materiality and the craftiness of its body. The broad scope of his interests led him to make unexpected connections between the art of painters or whole cultures which were separated by vast distances in space and/or time. Significantly, he contended that there was a similarity (more exactly, a "reversed continuity") between Cézanne's painting and the work of the sixteenth century Dutch painter Pieter Brueghel the Elder.[75] He found that they shared a sensitivity for the solidity of material, and had a similar way of representing materials in oil painting. Their particular sense for materiality was manifested not only in the way they represented objects and people, Popper affirmed, but permeated their paintings and integrated every element in them, including 'the air', the space between the objects, so that solidity and plasticity dominate and bind their pictures. Popper coined the term *Teig*, or 'dough' for this substance, which he later changed for *Allteig*, or 'general dough', meaning the sense of tangibility of their pictures and emphasizing the problem of the material[76] which he thought central in all art works, and in Brueghel and Cézanne in particular.

That Popper did not trust theory is also evident from his concept of 'misunderstanding'[77] which, he proposed, was a more important link in the concatenation of art works throughout history than anything else. He suggested that viewers misunderstand artworks in a great many ways: they are unaware of the technical limitations or flaws of the artists as well as the techniques they use, and they think that the art work conveys exactly what the artist intended to express whereas the artist may not have had a fully articulate idea about it himself in the first place. Another possibility for misunderstanding was that, as Lukács also observed, albeit with different results, the original historical context of the work sinks into oblivion, and audiences of later ages will lose sight of it or imagine it erroneously. This concept, although far from being fully developed, goes against the grain of the idea of metaphysical *necessity* and the clear connection between the creator and the created work, which Lukács advanced.

The consensus in early twentieth century Hungarian aesthetics and art criticism concerning the scorn for Impressionism and the unconditional devotion to Cézanne,

[75] Leo Popper: "Pieter Brueghel der Ältere," in Popper: ibid., pp. 31–37. Árpád Tímár noted that Lajos Fülep characterized the sense of materiality in Cézanne's paintings almost exactly like Popper. See Árpád Tímár: "Élmény és teória", p. 424.

[76] Popper: Letter to György Lukács, Paris, 04.22.1909: „I am working on an article on Brueghel and the problem of material," in Popper: p. 266.

[77] This term frequently occurs in his letters, see e.g. Popper, pp. 362, 365, 396, etc.

although consistent with the general judgment of progressive art writers all over Europe, is also an example of Popper's idea of 'misunderstanding.' It appears that under political and generational pressure there was more to the discourse on Impressionism than purely aesthetic consideration of forms, colors, painterly methods and concepts. Since Pál Szinyei Merse, the only significant Hungarian impressionist, had been rejected and ridiculed by the Hungarian Academy of arts for having suffered "delirium colorans" in the 1860s, bias from the academic rules and traditions in art had been as much a political issue as an aesthetic issue. Unlike the French Impressionists, however, Szinyei was a loner without any support from colleagues or the public, let alone a ruler who would call for a "*Salon des refusés*". He could not win his battle with the Academy. By 1906–1908 however, the artists of the Nagybánya Colony had not only assimilated Impressionism, they had already surpassed it in a deliberate and intensely colored painting style similar to that of Matisse and the Fauves in Paris. *The Seekers* and their theoretical supporters went beyond even this new-found colorism. Their artistic program united, if for a symbolic moment only, Kernstok and Lukács. They sought to transcend both Impressionism and the stylization based on color for the sake of a disciplined, intellectual, "investigative art" of structure, solidity, and order, transgressing both the nationalist rhetoric of the Academy and the smug taste of the urban middle classes, who had finally learned to appreciate the pure painterly values of the Nagybánya artists. In the Hungary of the 1900s and early 1910s artistic and literary radicalism went hand-in-hand with political radicalism against both the still existing feudal system and the new capitalism. Lukács's new generation of urban intellectuals created their own new theater, art, music and literature: a new metropolitan culture radically different from both academic decorum and bourgeois materialism that opened Hungarian culture to Europe. In this context Impressionism, dissolving the painting in light and color effects, was seen as the emblem of the unbridled and selfish individualism in a society lacking any solid substance and valid, powerful ideas.

Although Impressionism lost ground everywhere in Europe and the next generation of artists turned fiercely against it—the German Expressionists called the Impressionists mere "recording machines"—it had hardly been embattled with the zealotry of the Hungarian critics and aesthetes. Speaking strictly professionally, the Impressionists did not deserve to be talked down with such fervor. Impressionism was, in fact, the exact opposite of the subjectivism it was accused of. While it was meant to reflect and capture all the delicate optical changes caused by light, light itself, as much mysterious and poetic as purely optical, it arguably involved the metaphysical dimension of the quotidian it made visible. Impressionism was the most objective, optically accurate kind of painting, in which truthfulness to nature and the philosophical argument that not reality but only its *impression* can be grasped in a painting, might have deserved closer scrutiny; the very idea of distinguishing between *impression* and actual reality presupposes metaphysics. Denial of contours was also a way of dissolving the self in the world—in nature—rather than distinguishing it by means of thick, clear outlines and thus isolating it, as Gauguin had done. Alfred Werner went as far as stating (in retrospect) about the Impressionists that

> In reality, they were the true heirs of the Renaissance, men who had striven for the most scientific reproduction of the visible world. Wishing to record the sensations of the eye as faithfully as possible, they dissolved nature into chromatic vibrancies.[78]

While it could easily be a matter of color-fatigue or a sense of repletion in the face of the Impressionists' sophistication, for the neo-catholic French Symbolists as well as the faith-seeking Hungarians discrediting Impressionism was to a great extent ideological. Impressionism was an easy prey, because it totally lacked ideology.

But the same was true for Cézanne, although very little was known about his ideas until his letters were published decades after his death. He was a taciturn recluse, absorbed in the craft of painting. He labored because he wanted to make an art which would be, as he said, "as solid as the art of the museums." Pursuing the visualization of solidity was antithetical to the Impressionists' concept and praxis, but it was also a painterly, rather than an ideational program. Cézanne's philosophy fundamentally differed from that of the Impressionists inasmuch as he saw the picture as an independent entity, "a harmony parallel to nature,"[79] rather than nature's subservient portrait. He built up his paintings, stroke by stroke, as pieces of architecture, and the plasticity and the consistent, uncanny materiality of his work struck his admirers. Roger Fry was amazed by "the perfect correspondence of material quality to the idea" and "[Cézanne's] desperate search for the reality hidden beneath the veil of appearance."[80]

It was on account of his search for underlying structures—seeking truth, the hidden idea—that the art of Cézanne represented the metaphysical for *The Seekers* and their interpreters. They saw this pursuit as morally superior, and saw in it the anticipation of a coming age which, ever so vaguely imagined, would be the antidote to their own time.

But more might have been at stake here than aesthetics. It is hard to disregard the fact that the position of the Jews, even the *Bildungsbürgertum*, remained precarious in Hungary. The insecurity of their social acceptance was, even if subliminally, likely to have been among the factors which induced the young Jewish intellectuals of Budapest to yearn for a stable, unchanging, all-inclusive culture and society, where their situation would be finally settled, and where the rule of a superior idea would warrant ultimate stability. This ideal was what Lukács had written about Gauguin: to "have a place in society," and be "loved and happy" in it. In art, Classicism embodies the eternity and ultimate harmony they had been seeking; but it also needs to be remembered that Classicism, particularly when contrasted to individualism in artistic expression, is the rhetoric of power.

The tendencies of the theories and interpretation of art in early twentieth century Hungary may have all pointed in the direction of a new-classicism—not at all the

[78] Alfred Werner: "Introduction" to Roger Fry: Cézanne, ibid., n.p.

[79] Paul Cézanne to Joachim Gasquet, quoted by Werner, ibid.

[80] Fry, pp. 43, 38.

officially and politically encouraged Neo-Classicism of the inter-war period!—which proved to be a general tendency in Europe, particularly in the aftermath of World War I. However, there was a variety of methods which led to this conclusion. For example, while Popper understood the *Zeitgeist* from the artworks of his time, and drew conclusions about the underlying ideas from their form, materiality, and technical realization, Lukács drew his conclusions about concrete artworks from his pre-existing ideas of the *Zeitgeist*.

The order and calm of classicism in art apparently held the promise of disciplined and reflective thinking for the Hungarian theorists. Lukács, for whom, as we have seen, the critique of Romanticism was central, was inclined to validate Cézanne's painting of calm, order, and plasticity as the most clearly future-oriented art, pregnant with a new *Weltanschauung*. All the more so, because, as Roger Fry observed, "perhaps all great classics are made by the repression of a Romantic,"[81] which seems to have been his case, too.

[81] Fry, ibid., p. 87. He continues with an interesting insight: "In this respect we find a curious parallel to Cézanne in Flaubert. Both were children of the Romantic movement, both shared the sublime and heroic faith in art which that movement engendered, its devotion and absolutism. Both found their way by an infinitely laborious process out of the too facile formulae of their youth to a somewhat similar position, to an art based on passionate study of actual life, but ending in a complete transformation of its data."