



 **Local Contexts | International Networks**  
Avant-Garde Journals in East-Central Europe

**Local Contexts / International Networks**  
**Avant-Garde Journals in East-Central Europe**

Edited by Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi



Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum  
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## THE AVANT-GARDE AND ITS JOURNALS 2

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## Avant-Garde Studies in the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Past, Present and Future

The Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was founded in January 1956. It was modelled on the structure of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and comprised an institute for each major field of scholarship under the auspices of a central body of scholars. The Institute was set up to work on literary history with the long-term aim producing a synthesis of Hungarian literary history. Unofficially, it was also used to prepare and to consult on Party documents on literature and culture. Although subordinated to the control of the Party, it became an asylum for scholars who were denied positions at universities. It was thus a relatively peaceful and free institution.

In the period when Communist Party was consolidating its control of Hungary (1945–1948), the avant-garde was not regarded as an important part of the history of Hungarian culture, but as something ephemeral and even suspicious. Despite its undoubted role in the formation and development of modern Hungarian literature, the avant-garde was represented as a sort of childhood illness, an accident, a dead-end. Not even its influence on a number of important authors made it worth mentioning. There were several factors that gave rise to this view. Firstly, the Soviet line was simply to suppress the avant-garde and even expunge its memory. Secondly, although most artists of the Hungarian movement were close to the left and some were even communists, they did not fit into the image of the communist artist and were regarded as bourgeois, decadent, aberrant or dissident figures. Thirdly, the movement lacked continuity, with no vigorous generation following in the tracks of the ‘old’ (historical) avant-garde.

Since this was the canonical view of Hungarian literary history as dictated by Party ideology, literary historians were forced to comply with these guidelines. The relative freedom within the walls of the Institute did not make it immune from the pressure of official expectations. The



Figure 1. András Kappanyos and György C. Kálmán during the conference Local Contexts / International Networks in the Kassák Museum. Photo by Hajnalka Tulisz.

treatment of the avant-garde at the institutional level, however, contrasts with the work of some of its members. In the huge, six-volume history of Hungarian literature, the avant-garde appears as negligible side-track, merely a bizarre episode in the careers of some major authors. Paradoxically, study of the avant-garde was reserved for members of the Department of Socialist Literature, the part of the Institute intended to be most concerned with ideology. That was because the literature of the socialist movement was inextricably connected – personally, ideologically and poetically – to avant-garde trends. Despite the ideological constraints, some individual scholars interested in the movement did find an opportunity to elaborate important issues of the avant-garde both in the Hungarian (Miklós Béládi and Béla Pomogáts) and the international context (Miklós Szabolcsi and Endre Bojtár – the latter devoted a short but essential book to avant-garde trends in Central and East Europe).

When Party directives and official canons lost their direct effect on scholarly work in the Institute following the political transition of 1989 (the culmination of a trend that had started in the mid-1980s), a new interest in

the avant-garde emerged. The Institute is now preparing a new synthesis of Hungarian literary history, and the third volume will chiefly be about the twentieth century. Its central concept is the 'modern' and all its cognates – modernism, modernity, modern-ness, etc. This at last opens up opportunities for a complex and thorough treatment of all the histories and memories of avant-garde, its branches and afterlife, its predecessors and its hidden influences. Individual inquiries into both historical and present day (neo) avant-garde have also started to flourish again, and both authors of the present report have published monographs and anthologies in the field. The new generation is more and more interested in similar problems.

An outline of a current research plan may serve to give an impression of our present endeavours. We want to capitalize on the fact that our institute is the flagship of textological research in Hungary: several critical editions of great Hungarian authors have been, and are being prepared here. However, the textual corpus of the Hungarian avant-garde has never been assessed from this point of view.

Strangely, the overwhelming presence of Kassák's personality and oeuvre is a hindering factor. Unquestionably, no comparable literary talent emerged in the Hungarian avant-garde, without even mentioning his activities as organizer, editor and visual artist. It is also hard to deny that several of Kassák's followers were epigones, minor talents. But this should not allow us to forget about the truly original authors who either improved on Kassák's inventions or developed their devices independently.

Another factor obscuring our judgement is the relatively short lifespan of the Hungarian avant-garde. The movement itself lasted no more than one and half decades, even including its preliminary activities and aftermath. Its participants, however, went on with their own lives and oeuvres. Some exchanged aesthetic for political radicalism (like Sándor Barta and Aladár Komját); some gave up literature altogether (like, to the best of our knowledge, Mátyás György and Lajos Kudlák); and others started their 'serious' literary career after being 'cured' of the avant-garde (like Tibor Déry, Gyula Illyés and several others). Accordingly, the avant-garde period of these oeuvres, when presented in the accounts of literary historians, tends to appear as some sort of youthful excess.

These factors have so far delayed the objective assessment of the Hungarian avant-garde. The present public image of the avant-garde can best be described through the allegory of the iceberg: almost anything outside the Kassák-oeuvre is invisible, and even most teachers of Hun-



garian would be unable to come up immediately with the name a second avant-garde author. Our research aims at drawing the map of this invisible, 'underwater' territory. It is not an area full of brilliant masterworks so much as a domain of unique cultural-historical documents. They make up more than a footnote to the Kassák-oeuvre, just as the avant-garde is more than a footnote to the era of high modernism. The task is long due, and in the centenary year of the birth of the Hungarian avant-garde, it cannot be delayed any more.

In the Kassák Museum, the process of digitizing Kassák's three avant-garde reviews (*A Tett*, *Ma*, and *Dokumentum*) is already in progress. We have observed these proceedings as invited experts ever since the original planning period, and we have maintained our contribution throughout. The two projects mutually acknowledge and methodically support each other; they do not compete but complement. In a later period, a few years hence, the two projects might be unified and together might provide the full virtual textual corpus of the Hungarian avant-garde.

Our own project in the Institute of Literary Studies starts with the treatment of all of the individual volumes (books, booklets, pamphlets etc.) that were published by *Ma* and *Dokumentum* (except works by Kassák that are available in current editions, which will be dealt with when the idea of critically editing Kassák's oeuvre arises).

The second, and from the philological viewpoint, much more challenging part of the project is to find and digitize the periodicals that emerged outside Kassák's influence, partly in foreign political territories. Since not even the National Library holds full copies of all of these, we rely greatly on our international cooperative network of scholars in Vienna, Novi Sad, Cluj-Napoca and Bratislava.

The third phase will examine the books whose avant-garde character is not indicated by the name of the publisher. They are by authors who either left Kassák's circle or were never part of it. This corpus is quite difficult to define, and we will probably be unable to declare our list of avant-gardes (authors and works) to be complete and final.

The main purpose is to explore the complete textual corpus of the Hungarian avant-garde between 1915 and 1930. We plan digital publication in the first place, although paper-based editions may be warranted in some cases. Our present purpose, however, is to produce a textology-philology-based website that could become the virtual centre of Hungarian avant-garde scholarship.

We plan to present our material at the level of a critical edition, as far as the material itself allows us. We expect to find very few autographs, but will consider all textual variations. We provide the texts with annotations on the formation, impact and references of the texts. The corpus thus created, and our work on it, could serve as a starting point for several other projects. The philological process on the late avant-garde achievements (like the activities of Ödön Palasovszky or Károly Tamkó Sirató) can get off to a new start. Our work will enable some avant-garde-related correspondence (like that of Aladár Komját, Sándor Barta, László Moholy Nagy, Ervin Sinkó and others) to be explored. A potential by-product of the referential annotations, when organized and expanded, could be an encyclopaedia of the Hungarian avant-garde, gathering together all the data and connections of all periodicals, soirees, exhibitions and their participants.

By providing these necessary tools for further research in the fields of Hungarian avant-garde we hope to work off some of the handicap that has been left us by several decades of scholarly negligence.



Figure 1. Roundtable discussion during the conference Local Contexts / International Networks in the Kassák Museum (left to right: Krisztina Passuth, Piotr Rypson, Michalina Kmiecik, Klára Prešnjajderová, Dušan Barok, Clara Royer, Vojtěch Lahoda and Gábor Palkó). Photo by Hajnalka Tulisz.

Figure 2. Roundtable discussion during the conference Local Contexts / International Networks in the Kassák Museum (left to right: Vojtěch Lahoda, Gábor Palkó, Edit Sasvári, András Kappanyos, György C. Kálmán). Photo by Hajnalka Tulisz.