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## The Relationship Between the Avant-garde as the Mode and Its Reception as the Modality, Exemplified on *Phonation* by Serbian Composer Ana Gnjatović

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# The Relationship Between the Avant-garde as the Mode and Its Reception as the Modality, Exemplified on *Phonation* by Serbian Composer Ana Gnjatović

*Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman*

**Abstract:** My thesis in this paper is that the mode is always at the same time the modality, even if understood 'rigidly', in the sense of a specific way in which we work at something. The mode is the phenomenon brought about by the resignification of a certain modality to a dominant principle. Therefore, the mode represents a modality which has the status of a norm, in its longer or shorter duration.

This complex, circular relationship between the mode and the modality seems to be especially thought-provoking in the field of the musical avant-garde. This holds in particular when it is seen from the angle of its rationality, normativity, esotericism, ultimately from its distinctively radical sort of modernist creativity that promotes a poetical and aesthetic link between musical and theoretical invention. Viewed from that aspect, the avant-garde might be roughly qualified as the 'legislation', 'regulation', 'operation mode', and a creative compositional reception of the avant-garde, even if only in individual pieces, as the phenomenon of modality.

The described issue is here exemplified on the work *Phonation* for the voice and electronics (2016), by a distinguished Serbian author of the younger generation, Ana Gnjatović.

**Keywords:** avant-garde, mode, modality, Ana Gnjatović, *Phonation*.

My thesis in this paper is that the mode is always at the same time the modality, even if understood 'rigidly', in the sense of a specific way in which we work at something. The mode is the phenomenon brought about by the resignification of a certain modality to a dominant principle. That is noticeable at many musical levels (e.g. contrapuntal, harmonic, formal or stylistic), actually in all musical situations in which – owing to various

circumstances (from personal creative moments to social) – a norm changes by acquiring new, even significantly different forms. This implies that every norm, every mode is in fact a certain modality that for some time functions as a prevailing rule. This also means that the forming/defining/practicing of that rule as the mode is caused either by purely musical conditions and/or those standing beyond them. Therefore, the exposed thesis implies that the mode is always preceded by modalities; that it represents *a modality (or the consensus of modalities!)* which has the status of a norm, in its longer or shorter duration.

This complex, circular relationship between the mode and the modality seems to be especially thought-provoking in the field of the musical avant-garde. This holds particularly when it is seen from the angle of its normativity, esotericism, ultimately from its distinctively radical sort of modernist creativity that promotes the poetical and aesthetic link between musical and theoretical invention, cognition, epistemology and realisation. From that aspect, the avant-garde might be roughly qualified as the 'legislation', 'regulation', 'operation mode', as the result of a purely rational deed which combines the musical invention with theoretically and scientifically based procedures. In that case, the *creative* compositional reception of the avant-garde, even if only in individual pieces, belongs to the phenomenon of modality.

In *Phonation* for the voice and electronics (2016) by Ana Gnjatović, based on which I shall try to exemplify the described issue, avant-garde operating modes (although they are not the only ones in the work!) have a crucial poetical and aesthetic impact.

Ana Gnjatović is a distinguished Serbian author of a younger generation,<sup>1</sup> whose work so far is recognizable by its research dimension and unconventionality. She matured academically in the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century and first half of the second decade, that is, in the period when the issue of the end of Postmodernism had already been actualized in European music;<sup>2</sup> and when in Serbian music postmodernist

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Gnjatović was born in Belgrade, in 1984. She graduated from the Faculty of Music (Department of Composition) / University of Arts, in the class of Professor Milan Mihajlović. At the same department, she finished her doctoral studies in the class of Professor Srđan Hofman, defending artistic and theoretical part of her artistic project entitled "*Phonation*" for the voice and electronics. She works as a docent in the subject Analysis of a Work of Music, at the Faculty of Arts of the University in Priština (temporarily situated in Zvečane–Kosovska Mitrovica). She also lectures on the subject Multimedia Art, within the programme of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Arts in Belgrade.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Радош Митровић, "Крај постмодерне у европској музици и његова условљеност друштвено-политичким и уметничким контекстом." [Radoš Mitrović, "The End of Postmodernism in European Music and Its Causality by Socio-Political and Artistic Context."] (PhD diss., Faculty of Music / University of Arts in Belgrade, 2017).

compositional methodology and aesthetics, and by extension the prevalent compositional pedagogy, pointed to a roughly thirty-year long practice. In those circumstances, Ana Gnjatović chose to form her poetics on the path of a postmodernist inclination to the avant-garde.

So, in the first place, her work *Phonation* reveals a kinship with John Cage's *Song Books, Solos for Voice 3–92* (1970). This is not about being related to specific materials, but to Cage's experimental avant-garde procedures, first of all at the level of form, and the range and variety of voice treatment.

Therefore, in the style of postmodernist playfulness, Ana Gnjatović would say that "*Phonation* was not directly inspired by *Solos for Voice* except for what..." it *was* actually inspired by; and was inspired in fact according to all its featuring traits that A. Gnjatović lists in detail.<sup>3</sup> Of these, let us mention the following: the collection / list as the overall form; the performing ensemble (the voice and electronics); genre elements which include theatrical appearances during the live performance; the range and diversity of treatment of the vocal part and its relationship with electronics. In short, the form of list, genre of mixed-media and expanded techniques of vocalization, are, as some status avant-garde compositional modes, treated in *Phonation* in the sense of modality. In the same sense, and basically by the same elements, Ana Gnjatović was inspired by a work of Kenneth Goldsmith's, *73 Poems* (1993). Dedicated to Cage, intrinsically, it already 'responds' creatively to the modes of Cage's art in the field of poetry, fluxus, subcultural notions and contents. Having been also directly inspired by this achievement of Goldsmith's, A. Gnjatović at the same time necessarily established a second degree relationship towards Cage. In fact, with Goldsmith, she found confirmation of the artistic perspective of everything by which she was artistically attracted, incited and supported in Cage's *Solos*. More precisely, Goldsmith's *Poems* are articulated in the form of the notation of the visually created list of rhyming words, letters, numbers..., that is, various verbal materials, which apart from their semantic dimension, include that of the collection's and of the sound. In the next step, these dimensions inspired singer and composer Joan LaBarbara, otherwise a famous interpreter of Cage's works, to such an extent of interpretational freedom and invention, which Ana Gnjatović experienced as 'her own'.

With Cage and Goldsmith & LaBarbara, she 'recognized' her own ideas also in the range from the 'disorder' of the stream of consciousness to a deliberated quoting of non-musical and musical texts of various authors listed in Goldsmith's collection, among whom is also Cage. In other words, Cage's

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ана Ђњатовић, "Phonation'za glas i elektroniku. Teorijska studija." [Ana Gnjatović, "Phonation'forthevoiceandelectronics.Theoretical study."] (Doctoral artistic project, Faculty of Music / University of Arts in Belgrade, 2016), 16–17.

*Solos* and Goldsmith's &LaBarbara's73 *Poems*, acted as the right frame, the mode of operation and the norm, which Ana Gnjatović experienced as close to her artistic cognition, and suitable for the development through her personal creative aspects, in fact as a support to her own ideas.

In that sense, Cage's "bordel collection" – as he names the roughly shaped global form of his *Solos* – is 'translated' and considered in *Phonation* as a list. More precisely, it is considered as a combination of the elements of the collection and the cycle, because, like lists in general, *Phonation* involves both a deceptive disconnection of things they include, and their firm interconnection.<sup>4</sup> Usually, lists are compiled by choice, above all for practical reasons or a determined aim, as was the list of Ana Gnjatović, in her *Phonation*: to present the identity of her vocal style, and sources of influence on it. So, she would reveal to us that she had "conceived her work as the collecting, systematizing and, subsequently, poetical interpretation of the expanded techniques of vocalization, with reliance on (not only [her] own) experiences of composing, but also of the interpreting of contemporary vocal / vocal-instrumental (and, of course, electro-acoustic) music".<sup>5</sup> Her fascination by the phenomenon of lists, which to a considerable extent arises from her perceiving of the touch points between her own creative logic and the nature of lists, their 'rules' and possible usage ranges, but also her fascination with "the theory of lists in the art, and the creative potential, which [she] sees in them",<sup>6</sup> determined her choice of the list as the formal means, frame and compositional method in this work.

In the compositional-technical sense, the logic of the list is realized – generally, and thus in *Phonation*, too – as the intertextuality, citation,

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<sup>4</sup> Lists can be of a completely chaotic form, but also of the utmost systematized and functionalized form. They can represent only randomly notated names of different and disparate objects (e.g. those that we intend to buy, which need to be notated in the case of move, those lost or found, and the like), but also of things which are related and in a certain way thematically joined – from those entirely concrete such as are, for example, the list of addresses to which New Year congratulations should be sent, of artistic pictures prepared for customs, the cataloging of a library storage, or any kind of dictionary arrangement, to the lists of more or less immaterial issues like dreams or memories that appear without order, but still can be 'thematized' to a certain degree.

Therefore, the list may be only a reminder, an administrative document, but also any other systematized form of factual or conceptual material, shaped in a specific way and aiming at a certain purpose. The list may have the value of transient (one-time) or permanent use, which is why it becomes binding at different levels of practice. Thereby, it may be fixed or open, that is, completed or changeable. But also circular, obsessive, in the sense of series of things and information which through their circular overpresence seek to penetrate into the human consciousness and produce a desired effect (like with TV advertizing blocks, for example).

<sup>5</sup> Gnjatović, "Phonation'... Theoretical...", 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

processing and integration of the quoted contents in one's own musical discourse.

The work *Phonation* is a list of sixteen pieces / numbers, each of which contains some musical / sound reference. The numbers are grouped in three parts (5 + 5+ 6), which, "modeled on Cage",<sup>7</sup> are marked as *Mix 1*, *Mix 2*, and *Mix 3*, combining the elements of collection and cycle. According to the logic of collection, the pieces of which can be performed individually and at will, some compositions from *Phonation* have a certain completeness which enables their performance independently from the list (like *Speak Low 1* – the last number of the second part), or, are completed, but not thought out as potentially independent (e.g. *Speak Low 2* – from the first number of the second part).<sup>8</sup> According to the logic of the cycle, which relies on a thematic unity and the dramaturgical interdependence of its constituents, *Phonation* implements both the thematic unity and musical causality.

As already emphasized, the thematic focus of this work includes the issue of the vocal treatment. The very fact that it is composed for the voice and electronics guarantees – in the light of the author's already proven peculiarity of musical narration – a compositional research complexity and layered musical sound, whereby her vocal style, based on the expanded vocal techniques, is characterized. So, the vocal part in *Phonation* includes a large scope of articulation effects: from the singing and pronouncing of verbal contents, to the blurring of their meaning aiming at a specific sounding whenever the contents are exposed to a language that we do not understand, when they are cut up, electronically superimposed and as such dialogued, acoustically dismantled and reshaped from the gotten spectral elements, but also made from different noises originating from the considerable deceleration of the sound flow, with effects of the overemphasis of interpretational errors, due to which the author opens up specific sound spaces. In all these, we should also add the approaching, moving, permeating and friction between the vocal and electronic parts. In *Phonation* "the soloist neither screams, nor laughs, nor cries".<sup>9</sup> It is all done by the electronics, instead. Thereby, A. Gnjatović – as opposed to the above mentioned sources of her inspiration – explicitly suspends the acting role of (herself as) the soloist.<sup>10</sup> 'Banning' its (her own!) acting address to the audience, she actually wants to visually and scenically represent, symbolize the closeness and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> We should here have in mind that she composed *Phonation* for herself both as the vocal soloist and the performer on the electronics.

noncommunication of (her) creative act. That is the crucial reason for which I consider some theatrical indications in her work more at the level of media than artistic branches. More precisely, I consider them as constituents of the mixed-medium,<sup>11</sup> the genre which implies the autonomy of the musical and its existence in the form of the opus perfectum et absolutum, with simultaneous indications in the score for a non-musical media 'doubling' of an idea of the work, in live performance.<sup>12</sup>

Otherwise, according to Ana Gnjatović's understanding, not only are the possibilities and aspects of the vocal interpretation expanded through the use of the extended voice capacities, but also the notion of music in itself. She expands it in *Phonation* by everything that is "read (like prose), recited (like poetry), declaimed and proclaimed (like manifestos), listed (like colours)",<sup>13</sup> and which she has experienced on her artistic path so far, encountering with numerous "poetic and musical texts, prose, documentary and metatexts, intertexts, didaskalia and score headers...".<sup>14</sup> In the concretized list of these, besides Cage's *Solos* and Goldsmith's & La Barbara's *Poems*, there are lots of musical and extra-musical materials,<sup>15</sup> among which also those of avant-garde provinance, including, as we have seen, the specific vocal effects already well-known from avant-garde compositions. From a number of cult avant-garde texts applied in *Phonation*, there are – to mention only some of them! – poems from the James Joyce collection *Chamber Music* (1907) and a fragment *Anna*

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, "Contextuality of Musicology," in *New Sound Special Edition Poststructuralist Musicology*, ed. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman (Belgrade: Faculty of Music—Union of Yugoslav Composers' Organizations—Music Information Centre, 1998); also idem, "Musicology vs. Musicology from the Perspective of Interdisciplinary Logic," in *On Methods of Music Theory and (Ethno-)Musicology – From Interdisciplinary Research to Teaching*, Vol./ Bd. 4, ed. Nico Schüller (Frankfurt am Main, etc.: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in *Phonation*, sitting on the stage at the computer and a small MIDI keyboard, the female vocal soloist at the same time sings its part and 'plays' the electronics, without acting any drama role, with no communication with the audience, but being solely immersed in her musical performative doings, which is all a scenically effected 'doubling' of the idea of the strict privacy of the act of composing.

<sup>13</sup> Gnjatović, "Phonation'... Theoretical...", 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The composer gives a list of twenty-one numbered references, next to four kinds of listing (of colours, numbers in English, contents of chanting, sorts of inhalation), and five self-quotations.

"What is quoted in *Phonation*, and paraphrased, is not entirely discernible to me. I say that I quoted something just because this latter looked to me like it was quoted. Something is not on the list, because the sequence of distant associations and lateral flows of consciousness would require Freudian explanations, but even these would not seem useful. Something cannot be recalled in my memory, although it surely is stored in some corner of my consciousness." Ibid., 22.

*Livia Plurabelle*(ALP) from his novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Luciano Berio's *Sequenza III* (1966), a simultaneous poem by Tristan Tzara (*L'amiral cherche maison à louer*, 1916), a *Manifesto of Futurism* (of December 1923) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Their listing is the result of free appearances of the composer's memories, but still, in general, thematically guided in the sense of recollections<sup>16</sup> in whose reaching, overlapping, mixing and accumulating the author ruminates and musically establishes causal relationships. In the semantic and formal sense, she considers them as sources that helped her most to expand her horizon of voice treatment, in the course of the shaping and maturing of her vocal style. Each of the mentioned references (and there are some eleven of those avant-garde, in *Phonation*), experiences in this work – as is the case with the above explained avant-garde modes of the form of list, an expanded vocalization and theatre – its specific modality. More precisely, each of the references experiences the interpretation of its identity through becoming the organic element of the author's.<sup>17</sup>

In her work on *Phonation*, Ana Gnjatović also met an important artistic foundation in the patterns of futurists' and dadaists' activity. This is understandable considering their extensive relationship towards the verbal materials and their articulation, and in the light of the voice treatment with which, as we already emphasised, the author was primarily occupied while composing *Phonation*. She created her own modality of the futurist mode very specifically: relying on the chosen Marinetti manifesto. Thereby, she indicates that exactly the textual form of the manifesto bears the most explicit and programmatically most comprehensive mode of appearance of the historical avant-garde movements. And this all the more so because the manifestos of the historical avant-gardes in general, and with Marinetti in particular, might by themselves be considered as a kind of artistic creation. In Marinetti's manifesto the composer revealed two issues that appeared to be crucial for her *Phonation*: on the one hand, a definition of Futurism, actually a proclamation of the futuristic artistic and social-political operating mode, and,

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<sup>16</sup> "In my songs I recall melodies that are dear to me, or important; poems (stories, texts) that I know by heart; know by heart with errors; which I do not know so well; the songs that I sang (...), music that I once played or listened to, and now sing, compositions and reflections by others and myself, which all influenced me... With songs I also recollect the artefacts of singing, inhalation, exhalation, clicks, cracking, random voice manifestations common but unwanted during the performance." In the *Phonation* there are "lists inspired by the lists and which include lists, the lists for performing, and derived lists". Ibid., 25.

<sup>17</sup> "A list that includes inspiration, irritation, reflections, impressions, the list *which is someone's identity*, is conceived as a list that is not completely done and so is not closed until its actor (the one it is spoken about) is active. The very event of performance (...) enables an additional extension of the list through the awareness of that identity, the interpretation of identity. Thereby, my idea in this work was not to list everything, but to mention just something." Ibid., 26.



on the other hand, its documentary, sound dimension whereby she recalls the authenticity of the futuristic performance, given that she quoted the manifesto in the form of the recording of Marinetti's own reading.

This quotation is the basic content of the piece *Radio Dada*, which is placed just before the last piece of *Phonation*, but in fact starts in the previous one (*della Ninfa*), and ends up in the next, final piece – *A Thin Hair*.

The processing of the text / sound of this manifesto is carried out on the basis of layering with other archive sound recordings used in the same piece: Joyce's reading of the chapter *Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP)* from *Finnegans Wake*, and Gertrude Stein's reading of her own poem *Idem the Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson*.

### Example 1

Ana Gnjatović, *Phonation* for the voice and electronics  
 "Radio Dada" (b. 38–57) → "A Thin Hair" (b. 1–34)

The image shows a musical score for voice and electronics. It is divided into four staves: V (Voice), MID (MIDI), C (Cue), and SEQ (Sequence).  
 - **V (Voice):** Contains vocal lines with lyrics. The first part is marked 'più mosso' and 'a tempo' with a tempo of ♩ = 84. Lyrics include 'se... fa re no!', 'più no', 'fa la se re...', 'mi... mi... mi se-re - la', 'mi mi la la la la do', and 'non mi tor-men - ti più...'. Dynamics include *f*, *ff*, *mf*, and *pp*.  
 - **MID (MIDI):** Contains electronic accompaniment with dynamics *f* and *ff*.  
 - **C (Cue):** Shows a cue point at 6:33 and a file reference [F20]. A box indicates 'Audio file F20: Marinetti loudly reading, occasionally enter James Joyce and Gertrude Stein'.  
 - **SEQ (Sequence):** Contains text for the sequence. It includes the Italian text 'M.: Il futurismo è un grande movimento antifilosofico...' and the English text 'J: Well, you know or don't you kenet or haven't I told you every telling has a taling and that's the he and the she of it.'.  
 - **Timeline:** At the bottom, there are time markers for 6:30 and 6:33, with an arrow pointing to the start of the audio file.

**Lento** **poco rit.**

45 *p* 25

V A - mor \_\_\_\_\_

MID (a) mi A \_\_\_\_\_ (a) A - mor \_\_\_\_\_ A - mor \_\_\_\_\_

SEQ Me: ... I Futuristi sono i mistici dell'azione... Me: ... prudenza diplomatica, ... S: Very fine is my valentine. Very fine and very mine.

J: Fie!heur. Fie!ur! What age is at. It saon is late. 'Tis endless now semne eye or erwone last saw Waterhouse's clogh. J: O, my back, my back, my back! Td want to go to Aches-les-Pains. J: Pingpong! There's the Belle for Sexalotz!

**Dlačica**

*Leggiero, poco rubato sempre*

$\text{♩} = 120$

55

V Što\_ mo-taš svo-ju dla-a-či-cu, Jen-dva-tri tu dla-a-či-cu, Kad dru-gog vo-liš

C [7:33] [F21]

SEQ S: Very mine is my valentine very mine and very fine. Very fine is my valentine and mine, very fine very mine and mine is my valentine. M: Armati di corraggio... (Marinetti continues)

J: Wring out the clothes! Wring in the dew! J: Flip! Spread on your bank and I'll spread mine on mine. Flip!

[7:33] [F21]

26

*meno mosso* *gliss.*

7

V ti? Što\_ mo-taš svo-ju dla-a-či-cu, Jen-dva-tri tu dla-a-či-cu, Kad dru-gog vo-liš ti? O lju-ba-vi\_ niš-ta ne znam, Jen-dva-tri ja ne znam Baš niš-ta o njih dvo-o - je,

SEQ [F20 Continued] *p* [F21 Continued]

*a tempo* *presto*

$\text{♩} = 120$   $\text{♩} = 144$

20

V Jen-dva-tri njih dvo-je. Pa\_ da-vo nek me no-o - si, Jen-dva-tri me no-o - si a-ko dru-gog vo-lim ja. I kad sr-ce um i te lo Sa-

C [8:12] [F22]

SEQ [F21 Continued] S: And a very little woman with black hair and a yellow hat and an excellently smiling appropriate soldier.

[8:12] [F22]

### Sound Example 1

Ana Gnjatović, *Phonation* for the voice and electronics  
“Radio Dada” (b. 38–57) → “A Thin Hair” (b. 1–34)  
(6:30–8:12)



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All of them – the sound qualities of Joyce’s reading, more than the discerning of what is read, then love implications in the lyrics of Gertrude Stein, and especially in Kurt Schwitters’ *Denaturalized Poetry* used as the content of the vocal part in the final piece in which, until the end of its first verse, Marinetti can still be heard – both from the sound and semantic aspect firstly mitigate and then, in the name of love, finally suppress Marinetti’s aggressiveness and profascistic political preference.

In accordance with this dramaturgy, the recording of Marinetti’s voice lasts continuously, with Gnjatović’s interventions solely in the field of its dynamics, when, through amplification and silencing, she metaphorically points to the ‘power relations’ of the quoted ‘protagonists’, she herself advocates. In other words, from a boisterous and military beginning to a complete cessation, Marinetti is essentially contested in *Phonation* in his politically destructive dimension, but not only Futurism in its sound dimension, which is, moreover, ‘reinforced’ through the dadaistic practice of layering, characteristic of the simultaneous poetry.

Unlike the sound recording of the manifesto, the other audio recordings in *Radio Dada* are interrupted, more precisely, cut up to be mutually freely combined, with the aim of achieving a certain sound unfolding and signification – as is the case with the shaping of several ‘dialogues’ that match the dramaturgy of denial of Marinetti’s politicality. These are: a ‘dialogue’ between the manifesto and *Finnegans Wake*, then *Finnegans Wake* and *A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson*, and, in the final piece, between *A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson* and *Denaturalized Poetry*. Therefore, the reading of the Manifesto has a ‘pedal’ sense, being changed only in its dynamic values. They are intensified and silenced on the matching semantic places (including the fade-out of Marinetti’s shouting), while the other recordings are layered on the basis of their cut up and interrelated fragments.

In other words, like the lists of Cage’s *Solos* and Goldsmith’s &LaBarbara’s *Poems*, expanded in the vocal and genre sense and acting as some of the avant-garde modes in Ana Gnjatović’s *Phonation*, both Futurism and Dadaism

in this composition are no longer just the provocatively seductive rules or fanaticism in advocating the discipline of a norm, or once dominant unconventional artistic patterns (no matter how short-lived they were as historical avant-garde movements). Or, it is still all of that, or at least something of that, but as a kind of a personal consideration and interpretation of certain identities: as an individual understanding of the mode as modality.

In addition, the fact that the avant-garde ceased to be the avant-garde a long time ago, to a large extent also because of the transformation of its modes into modalities in which it has actually been dismantled, as well as the issue of building a new norm from these modalities – is already another topic.

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