

ESSAY

Marxist-Leninist Roots of Zenitism

On Historical Avant-Garde Corrections in Karpo Godina's film *Splav Meduze*

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The initial thesis put forward by Karpo Godina and Branko Vučićević in their film *Splav Meduze* (1980), as director and screenwriter respectively, is that the Yugoslavian avant-garde movement Zenitism from the 1920s had communistic roots¹. To formalize this radical thesis we have to add that the communism of Zenitism makes sense only when it is understood primarily as something cultural and specifically as something of a cinematic nature. This cultural, or artistic, communism at the same time limits the politicization of the avant-garde art. The main reason for this limitation is the understanding of communism as hatred of the bourgeoisie, which replaces the denegation of Marxist-Leninist theory with the anarcho-nihilistic negation of the bourgeoisie and the promotion of a populist spirit. In spite of this theoretical limitation, the film introduces corrections to the historiography of Zenit that even today – possibly even more so – we can talk about the validity of this intervention. In this essay I will deal with this particular episode of the Yugoslav avant-garde.

To start with, the negativity and refusal of communism as a “wild practice,” which Louis Althusser referred to as a Leninist style, can also be used as an explanation for the political and conceptual roots of the Zenitist barbarogénie:

A wild practice (une pratique sauvage) in the sense in which Freud spoke of a wild analysis, one which does not provide theoretical credentials for its operations and which raises screams from the philosophy of the ‘interpretation’ of the world, which might be called the philosophy of denegation. A wild practice, if you will, but what did not begin by being wild?²

To this point could also be added Clara Zetkin's reminiscences of Lenin's take on modern art:

We are good revolutionaries, but we feel obliged to point out that we stand at the 'height of contemporary culture.' I have the courage to show myself a 'barbarian.' I cannot value the works of expressionism, futurism, cubism, and other -isms as the highest expressions of artistic genius, I don't understand them!³

Lenin's barbarian position on culture should be understood to be somewhat literary as a position outside of the consensus of interpreting the world; something that does not play by the rules of the game. This highly speculative claim of an anti-consensus style in Lenin's "historical materialist vision" of art was given a try by Geoffrey Waite in 1986 by applying this barbaric denegation to the Velazquez painting "Las Meninas" 1665. The result was that from Michel Foucault to John Searle via Jacques Lacan the whole spectrum of interpretations on "Las Meninas" have proved to be saying the same old thing: that art could be understood only from the perspective of a bourgeois vision (an ocular regime). Waite took a pain-staking path to demonstrate that Lenin should tell things from the different perspective of class struggles.⁴

The movie *Splav Meduze* does not directly present such a "barbaric" historical-materialist vision of imperialistic and capitalistic mechanisms, grinding the proletariat through the lens of avant-garde art. But it does pose the general question of the position of avant-garde art in relation to communism. In that sense, Godina and Vučićević's film is a correction made to the claim of a political avant-garde; it does not silence its components based on Marxism-Leninism. In the last instance, it describes that communism for Zenit was a cinematic experience, and vice versa. In order to understand how this claim works in the movie we have to set accounts with some elementary facts regarding the 'interpretations' of Zenit.

Branko Vučićević himself was one of the most careful readers and an astute corrector of many of these 'interpretations'.⁵ To mention some relatively recent events, we can briefly look at Vučićević's favourite targets, Miško Šuvaković's and Gojko Tešić's writings on Zenit. Both have interpreted the movement as a cultural position in the highest echelon of internationalism in 1920s Yugoslavia which was absorbing most of the advanced European artistic productions. Yet, it is not only that these interpretations had many factual mistakes (the legend says that Vučićević, who was the translator of Camilla Grey's "The Russian Experiment in Art", found over two hundred mistakes in the book), but that they are also lacking the conceptual foundations of the avant-garde art position. As for Šuvaković, who triggered the international fame of the movement, Zenit and other avant-garde movements from Yugoslavia never succeeded in any historical maturation due to abrupt political cuts and

interventions.⁶ Tešić made an even more daring step: interpreting Zenit as one of the necessary steps in the ladder of the avant-garde historical progress; or more precisely positioning Zenit as one of the stations of avant-garde voluntarism. The name of this oxymoron is “tradition of avant-garde”, an intellectual position which negates the most fundamental anti-historicist quest initially proposed by Victor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists in the 1920s, saying that the history of art does not follow the rule of linearity of tradition as a son succeeding his father, but the zig-zag road of a nephew succeeding his poor uncle.⁷ The poor uncles of Zenit are Lenin and Conrad Veidt; this is what *Splav Meduze* makes clear.

There is no need for the “tradition of avant-garde” to emphasize the nationalistic elements in Ljubomir Micić and Zenit (such as Balkanism, Serbianism, etc.), because the very form of how it does conceptualize the avant-garde art is grounded in the nationalist and historicist combination. Two of the most recent Zenit interpretations are a proof of this. Both Marijeta Bozovic and Lada Grlan are understanding Zenit as an art practice which was instrumental in the modernization of the backward cultural sphere of Yugoslavia. According to Bozovic, Marina Abramović is a direct successor of this instrumentalisation of globalist Balkan art: one which “appropriates the best that other cultures had to offer, from the position of the margins.” Both Bozovic and Grlan have continuously reiterated the fact that a massive and impressive list of international artists and writers have sent their contributions to the Zenit journal. In order to accommodate the eclecticism of Zenit ranging from pan-Slavism, Nietzscheanism, Constructivism, Expressionism, Bolshevism, etc. to this instrumentalism – which her intellectual mentor Šuvaković has called an “anarchistic approach”⁸ – Bozovic describes this position as being a “thief of culture”: one which combines the heterogenous elements in such order that they result in an “international significance” (the key to Marina Abramović’s success?!). The cry over the identity and originality of the “the thief” amidst the heterogeneity and borrowed materials is obviously a mark of the de-politicization of the avant-garde, primarily as a de-politicization in the form of the denegation of the subject-matter – of struggle and violence.⁹ In order to depict the political aspect of this “borrowed” language of colonization (language of dependency would be more accurate), Bozovic uses an excerpt of a text by Ljubomir Micić published in Zenit’s issue N° 37 in 1925 on the struggle for independence in Morocco. What Bozovic describes as “an acute interest in the revolts of Europe-apportioned Africa” is actually part of a text with the ironic title “Morocco, and Once More for the Salvation of the Civilization”, which ascribes the suggestive slogan “The Imperialism is the Bible of Europe and the Europeans” to the Leninist refusal of imperialism as a final stage of capitalism.¹⁰ It is clear that the interest is not directed towards the apportionment of Africa, but the “struggle for human emancipation and people’s independence”.¹¹ Even more telling is a short interview of Branko V. Poljanski with Marinetti, (the warmonger of Italian imperialism towards Africa) which is published next to the essay on Morocco, which clearly distinguishes

the barbarity of Zenit from the barbarity of Futurism.¹²

Lada Grlan took this interest even further by describing the device of being informed by the “best” of the European tendencies in Zenitism as a sign of a practice which she calls “simultaneism”. In short, this simultaneism means that Zenit, in spite of being negative and anarchistic, had an affirmative and constructive function in the sense that it was attuned with the most progressive European and world cultural tendencies. This implies an understanding of Zenit and other avant-gardes as mediators of European novelties to an underdeveloped and backward Yugoslavian territory.¹³ In fact this ‘national’ interpretation of Zenit is in many cases symptomatically related to the underlying issue of the supposedly affirmative character of the movement in that sense that it “functionalized the new national art in a international context”, as Irina Subotic, quoted by Grlan, wrote in the 1980s. The duality of nationalism and contemporary art is not an exceptional situation, but can be seen in all tendencies wherein art is treated as instrument of the state’s ideological apparatus. But one formal thing is familiar to most of them: in order for avant-garde to reproduce nationalism, it has to give up its most fundamental constituent, namely its negativity. The denegation of this negativity, which in many cases took shape as denegation of Marxist-Leninist negativity (wild analysis, barbarity, etc.) is a starting point for many nationalistic and normative appropriations of avant-garde refusals. To give one further example: “However, unlike Micić’s concept of ‘Barbarogenius,’ the free man offering old and exhausted Europe fresh creativity and vitality coming from Balkan mountains, the idea of the ‘free man’ promoted by Communists was an economic concept.”¹⁴

What, then, was Zenit’s Marxism-Leninism? In *Splav Meduze* it appears in a few episodes, clearly indicating that the shame of imperialism, the barbarity of European colonialism, the famous wreck of the French naval frigate ‘Méduse’ as depicted by Théodore Géricault is a most accurate picture of the barbarism of imperialism as the last stage of capitalism. This is made clear in the scene where under the reproduction of Géricault’s painting a photo of Lenin can be seen, and further in the unsuccessful attempt of the group’s members to agitate in the factories; also through artificial and decorative indicators such as the watch depicting Lenin, as well as Mayakovsky, the Internationale, and other scenes in the movie. But in the actions of the Zenit group and in their journal Marxism-Leninism is visible in many different ways. Now, it is thoroughly futile to deal with the Marxism-Leninism of Zenit in this text. Firstly it would imply that the accuracy of *Splav Meduze* should be measured against the correct representation of the historical material, something which the ‘Cahiers du cinéma’ writers in the 1970s ironically named “Z” movies (referring to the ‘political-pop’ narrative of Costa Gavras). The second difficulty would be the use of the term ‘Marxism-Leninism’ itself.

Zenit viewed in light of Marxism-Leninism is not an isolated case of

interpretation: Zoran Markus in the 1970s wrote about Zenit as an avant-garde based on “concise Marxist-Leninist teachings, (...) with some exceptions of local nationalist relations”.¹⁵ Then, this claim was opposed fiercely both as a falsification of Zenit and synthetic internationalism by Branko Aleksić, who criticized Markus’ enthusiasm for Zenit’s role in the international avant-garde¹⁶, and for deliberately silencing the ultra Serbian nationalism and anti-Yugoslavianism of Ljubomir Micić.¹⁷

One of the most obvious references – apart from the already mentioned text on Morocco – to Zenit’s Marxism-Leninism can be found in a text published in the last issue of the journal (No. 43, December 1926) titled “Zenitism Through the Prism of Marxism”. The constatation could not be clearer: “Zenitism is a son of Marxism”.¹⁸ Further on in the text the claim is made that:

Barbars – they are the world-wide proletariat, they are ideas of the overall proletarian strength, which has a volcanic power, raw, strong natural elements, yet not spoiled by bourgeois emancipation – it is ‘Moscow against Paris’, it is ‘east against west.’¹⁹

Maybe we have to look at the Marxism-Leninism of Zenit exactly in this rawness; in this barbarity and immediacy. But once this claim is made, the most obvious difficulties will be introduced to the discussion: the whole range of commonalities, of spontaneity and ideological immediacies, will be part of this conceptualization of communism. By excluding ‘abstraction’ from Marxism-Leninism, this conceptualization in Zenit is directly linked with the most reactionary idealization of communism through the lenses of anarchism. To paraphrase this would be to correct the claim of Dr. Rasinov (most probably Micić under a pseudonym) as “Zenitism through the Prism of Marxism seen with the Lenses of Anarchism”. I have indicated at the beginning that this rawness, this barbarism could be detected in the theory of Lenin as well; but in order for this rawness to have a dialectical nature it should be emancipated from the immediacy of nature and explosions of spontaneous materials. Obviously Zenit is lacking devices for such an abstraction (and actually this was the main argument of the Yugoslav Surrealist’s criticism of Zenit in the 1930s).

But maybe we have to look at this Marxist-Leninist rawness in some other field than in political abstraction, or political intelligibility. We could suppose that the communism of Zenit was actually a cinema itself. Pavle Levi in his book on “Cinema by other means” or “total cinefication” discussed, among many other things from Yugoslavia, Zenitism’s contribution to this field. Looking at various discussions on Zenitism in his book we can see that the cinefication of Zenit is almost always related to a rawness and immediacy of the concrete and the realism that is directly linked to technology. “The movement’s ‘energetic imperative’”, “embodiment of countless possible techno-libidinal movements”,

“Reality, the Ur-state of cinema!”, etc.²⁰ Bozovic is right in writing thus about the Zenit journal as a specific cinematic medium: “Looked at in such a context, the highly visual Zenit journal begins to resemble illustrated films scripts, with included stage directions and implicit sound effects: each ‘viewer’ might come away with a slightly different version of the shared and implied”.²¹ Yet, she is wrong to relate this heterogeneity and intertextuality to Marina Abramović’s form of contemporary art that is firmly based on reaching the limits of inner experience and ideological and reactionary subjectivism. The radicality of Zenit’s cinematic rawness seen as communism is neither a Godardian cine-communism, which aims at total textualization of the Marxism-Leninism (as Colin McCabe, Stephen Heath and Peter Wollen have insisted); nor is the intertextuality of their corpus similar to what Mikhail Iampolski tried to discuss through the concept of hieroglyphic and anagrammatic writing that resists the linear narrative, or “enigmatic puzzle that resists solution”.²² I think that the best way to understand this communism as cinema in relation to everyday life’s rawness, as well as the possibilities of technology and media, is to approach it with the terms elaborated by Walter Benjamin.

Philosophically speaking, the everyday life starts to have political meaning in a modern sense that is familiar to us only after the October Revolution. As John Roberts very clearly demonstrated:

from 1917 the ‘everyday life’ in Soviet culture is subject to an extraordinary theoretical elaboration and scrutiny that largely shapes the content of the concept through the twentieth century, pulling other uses of the ‘everyday’ towards it.²³

It is obvious that Micić and the Zenit movement, as rest of the avant-gardes, were drawn to this radical transformation. In this sense it is not only nationalism based on Slavic suprematism which pulled Micić and Zenitism towards October and Lenin, as Konstantinović and Aleksić are claiming; instead there is an inherent political emancipation in this transformation that is inscribed in this interest in Marxism-Leninism. Benjamin detected this change in strict conceptual terms by arguing that the transformation of everyday life was influenced primarily through transformation of technique, or nature, which results in difference between the first and the second nature. The second nature, differing from the first, is manifested in the construction of cinema as a “nature which speaks differently to the camera than to the eye”. This difference, the transformation of second-nature is a Spielform (play-form) allowing space for intervention. As Esther Leslie has put it: communism is a political form that engages in a playful encounter with the ‘second-nature’.²⁴

The cinematic communism of *Splav Meduze* should be seen in this political and philosophical context : as a possibility of speaking differently about reality through the language of cinema – a reality which, like everything else, was

changed through the October Revolution. Godina's film detects this intersection from many perspectives. To actualize *Splav Meduze* today should not be part of the symptomatic insistence of artistic freedom in the Yugoslavian (read Balkanic) context of socialism, but it should be part of a theoretical position rigorously facing the historical fact that the effect of the October Revolution is by far deeper and stronger than usually acknowledged. Our task should be to insist and properly detect these moments at the intersection of politics and arts without accepting the norms and concepts set by reactionary discourses on art history.

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