

# The modification of meaning: Cézanne, Hildebrand, Meier-Graefe and the problems of cultural transfer

Csilla Markója

## The 'Hungarian Fauves' – what does it mean?

'I long believed that Hungarian modernism began with the Eight, but it turned out that it started with the "Hungarian fauves", around 1906,' declared Krisztina Passuth, curator-in-chief to the newspaper *Népszabadság*. She went on to add: 'Hungarian art history needs to be rewritten.'<sup>1</sup>

This euphoric pronouncement heralded the exhibition 'Hungarian Fauves from Paris to Nagybánya 1904–1914',<sup>2</sup> staged at the Hungarian National Gallery (2006). This show, which was afterwards displayed at three locations in France, prompting widespread interest in the media there,<sup>3</sup> was accompanied in Hungary by debates regarding terminology. 'Were the Hungarian fauves really fauves?' asked art historians and art critics. During the discussions which followed, problems of cultural transfer – i.e. those of the acceptance, adoption, translation, and interpretation of a given segment of another culture, another narrative – were given a good airing, especially at the conference organised as just one of the events intended to augment and interpret the exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

Together with Gergely Barki, Péter Molnos, Zoltán Rockenbauer and Attila Rum, Krisztina Passuth, professor at the Institute for Art History at the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest and an eminent researcher of the Eight and the activists, investigated the years preceding the appearance of the Eight. The threads led to France. 'A fine exhibition – perhaps

<sup>1</sup> The writing of this paper was funded by a János Bolyai Research Scholarship awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 'A "magyar Vadak" fölfedezése. Ismeretlen remekművek a Nemzeti Galériában. Varsányi Gyula riportja Passuth Krisztinával' [Discovering the Hungarian Fauves. Unknown masterpieces at the HNG], *Népszabadság*, 27 February 2006 issue. 11.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition between 21 March and 30 June 2006 was organised by Krisztina Passuth, Gergely Barki, and György Szücs.

<sup>3</sup> The international response to the exhibition was highly impressive, at least with regard to the statistics. The show featured 3 times on television and 6 times on radio. In addition, the French daily and weekly press (including *Le Monde*, *L'indépendant*, *La Tribune*, *Paris Match*, *Elle*, and *Palette*) reported on it – briefly or at greater length but almost invariably in illustrated articles – on 44 occasions and the monthly press on 74 occasions. The foreign press published 42 articles on the exhibition, along with invitations and snippets of news that together numbered more than these. Fifty Internet sites informed their readers concerning the travelling exhibition, which was augmented with works by French fauves.

<sup>4</sup> The show was accompanied by a series of lectures, with the participation of György Szücs Krisztina Passuth, Anna Szinyei Merse, Gyula Kemény, László Jurecskó, Gergely Barki, Zoltán Rockenbauer, and Tamás Tarján.

this is the first feeling the visitor has on seeing the representative selection,' wrote the correspondent of the periodical *Új Művészet*, summing up his impressions, 'An exhibition like this can only be put together from works made in a great period of art. Can we say that the art of the Hungarian fauves counts as one of the exceptional moments in Hungarian painting?' Passuth replied: 'Yes. This was the moment – to be more exact, it was a period of few years, from 1906 to 1912 specifically – when modern Hungarian painting was born. For us today, what happened then seems for us fully amazing. An art was born that was absolutely in synchrony with European trends, even the most recent French and German ones, an art whose autonomous peculiarities and values were – and continue to be – characteristic only of the Hungarian fauves.'<sup>5</sup>

In his assessment of the exhibition's significance in art history, Géza Perneczky went even further than this: 'We should attach much more weight after this exhibition to the young Hungarian artists familiar with Fauvism who visited Paris after 1904 and who in some cases stayed there for a longer period. But as regards their role in Hungary, we should see these artists, whom their colleagues called 'Neos' (neoimpressionists), a label that stuck for decades, simply as representatives of the ferment that started at the Nagybánya artists' colony and in the MIÉNK circle. More is needed. Although in the contemporary press the word *chercheurs* was voiced many times in connection with them (this term later found an echo in Károly Kernstok's expression 'Inquisitive Art'), it was they who found, and represented for a year or two, what later on already could only be spoilt. If we accept this, though, then we must move to an earlier date the fault line that separates the story of the direct influence of *plein air* painting (more specifically the Nagybánya school), and the secessionist endeavours in Hungary that were occurring almost in parallel with it, from the *avant-garde*, which was then knocking at the door. The start of the Hungarian *avant-garde* thus moves a few years earlier. But even this correction does not express entirely the full extent of the new recognitions. It is not simply that the Eight's appearance around 1910 now seems not to have been the first *avant-garde* stirring in the history of Hungarian art. An additional factor is that our impression of the Eight as a classicising branch – one more retrogressive than progressive in respect of innovation – of the stirring that had begun five or six years earlier may be growing.' However, to his markedly unsympathetic opinion he immediately added: 'Of course, it could be that we remember only erroneously what the Eight actually painted [...]. In this, a role is most certainly played by the fact that many of their works are in private collections; without these the Eight cannot be shown in a way that is truly fitting. [...] But however much we try to save the situation, this much is certain: a sea change has taken place.'<sup>6</sup>

After preparations lasting four years for the exhibition that gave rise to this 'sea change', another four years needed to pass for the same 'research group' to step forth with a 'fitting' presentation of the Eight, as an organic continuation of the earlier show. The group's members

<sup>5</sup> P. Szabó, Ernő: 'A modern festészet ünnepi pillanatai. Beszélgetés Passuth Krisztinával a Magyar Vadak Párizstól Nagybányáig 1904–1914 című kiállításról' [Festive moments of modern painting. Interview with KP]. *Új Művészet*, 16, 2006, 6. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Perneczky, Géza: 'Revízió a magyar avantgárd kezdeteinek kérdésében' [Revision concerning the beginning of Hungarian *avant garde*]. *Holmi*, 19. 2007. 296–297.

undertook a task that seemed impossible, namely to reconstruct the three emblematic exhibitions staged between 1909 and 1912 at which members of the Eight (Róbert Berény, Béla Czóbel, Dezső Czigány, Károly Kernstok, Ödön Márffy, Dezső Orbán, Bertalan Pór, Lajos Tihanyi) – who were recruited from the much broader circle<sup>7</sup> of the Hungarian fauves – took part along with friends they had invited (Artúr Jakobovits, Vilmos Fémes Beck, Mária Lehel, Anna Lesznai, Márk Vedres).

We thus have an opportunity to ponder questions that Éva Forgács (eminent researcher of modernism in Pasadena) put in the columns of the journal *Holmi*: ‘Can concepts or artistic practices be transferred from one culture to another; and how much can another cultural context modify the meaning and function of a given artistic language, in the present case a language of painters?’ Forgács herself answers these questions, when in her nuanced analysis she points out that sometimes ‘cultures of forms and languages of images can be transferred from one culture to another’, ‘which, however, cannot be lifted across [...], the embeddedness in history of some modes of expression, in this case the context created by the French Enlightenment and French Revolution, in the frameworks of which the French viewer saw the pictures of the fauves, even when these were mediated, since antecedents of these pictures [...] “had given rise to unconscious associations.”’ According to Forgács, the historical context of early twentieth-century progressivism in Hungary is essentially different from the French: ‘Those Budapest intellectuals who served as the repository of progressivism did not hark back to the ideas – of 1848, let us say – relating to Hungarian attempts to secure bourgeois freedoms, but, turning against their liberal fathers, relied on the ideas of German philosophy, and wished to create a new metaphysics. As the early essays of György (Georg) Lukács, Béla Balázs, and Lajos Fülep show, these intellectuals wished to create a new and extensive Hungarian national culture in the spirit of German idealism, a culture for which they drew inspiration from Ady’s poetry, from the pathos of his *New Verses* that heralded a new age. Their rebellion was directed first and foremost against impressionism, which – having partly misunderstood – they considered art characterised by superficiality and subjectivism. Their ideal was Cézanne, in whose structured pictures they saw – likewise partly erroneously – the glorification of metaphysics.’<sup>8</sup> At this point, Forgács quotes one of the authors of the catalogue, Péter Molnos, who in one of his studies speaks of how ‘at the birth of the new painting, at the starting out in Nagybánya of Czóbel, Berény, Perlrott, and their associates [...], it was problems purely to do with painting that were in focus of attention, independently of every element outside art’, and of how ‘conscious emphasising of structure and composition was basically alien from the colour-centred,

<sup>7</sup> The authors of the catalogue included under the collective term ‘Hungarian Fauves’ the following artists, by virtue of works they produced during a particular phase of their careers: Béla Balla, Rezső Bálint, Géza Bornemisza, Tibor Boromisza, István Csók, Dezső Czigány, Valéria Dénes, Sándor Galimberti, Gitta Gyenes, Vilmos Huszár, Béla Iványi Grünwald, Károly Kernstok, Nana Kukovetz, Ödön Márffy, András Mikola, József Nemes Lampérth, Dezső Orbán, Tibor Pólya, Bertalan Pór, Armand Schönberger, Lajos Tihanyi, János Vaszary, Sándor Ziffer.

<sup>8</sup> Forgács, Éva: ‘Vadak vagy koloristák?’ [Fauves or colourists] *Holmi*, 19. 2007. 310–312.

deconstructing spontaneity of Fauvism'.<sup>9</sup> Despite the labelling, the members of the research group evaluated – and formulated – the differences accurately. Gergely Barki, one of the organisers of the exhibition, declared to the periodical *Műértő*: 'Seeing the pictures emerging in the art trade, one could guess even at the outset that something new would come together, and we were aware that if we began in a systematic way to dig out the pictures hidden away at public collections, there would be surprises for everyone. An appreciable part of the exhibition came from material that had been gathering dust in museum storerooms. The period between 1905 and 1909 had not been markedly represented in the specialist literature earlier on; the term itself 'magyar Vadak' [Hungarian Fauves] raised questions. For the time being, no one was able to come up with anything better, although I, too, did not consider this term entirely appropriate, nor in the end the expression 'Hungarian Fauves' either. Even now we know little. The exhibition at best called attention to the fact that there was a tendency that needed to be addressed.'<sup>10</sup> One difference between the viewpoints related to the usefulness or harmfulness of the term 'Hungarian Fauves', which was declared unsatisfactory. 'For strategic reasons', Éva Forgács did not deem fortunate 'the labelling of this painting, rich and encompassing different endeavours, with the expression 'Hungarian Fauves'. The entirety of modern Hungarian painting, which began late, has never been described using terminology other than that created by Western and Russian narratives, this giving no chance for any kind of distinctive quality, voice, or half-voice, or something original even, to be present in Hungarian art.'<sup>11</sup> The situation was evaluated similarly by Ilona Sármany-Parsons:

When local art histories began to be constructed as the history of a national art, an universal measure of a virtual kind dangled in the collective consciousness of the day: the path of French art, as a universal path. [...] When we read the exciting and interesting studies in the catalogue for the Hungarian Fauves, it becomes clear that the very same fire burned in the breasts of the young Hungarian art historians of 2006 as had burned in the breasts of those of 1906. The proof that we Hungarians managed to connect synchronically with the French experiments with form; in other words, we were modern and we did not lag behind in the race for new visual solutions. [...] In other words, Czóbel, Berény, Perlrott, etc. were there in the Salon d'Automne, alongside Matisse and in the company of Derain, with fresh, uniquely new pictures: in Paris and in the vanguard! [...] But did anyone notice us? Is it not illusory to hope that with this evidential material we can step, albeit afterwards, into the "centre" and integrate into the principal trends in the history of painting?<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Molnos, Péter: 'The "Paris of the East" in the Hungarian Wilderness'. In: *Hungarian Fauves from Paris to Nagybánya*. Ed. by Krisztina Passuth, György Szücs. Budapest, Hungarian National Gallery, 2006. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Gréczi, Emőke: 'Vadak után, Nyolcak előtt. Beszélgetés Barki Gergely művészettörténéssel'. [After the Fauves, before the Eight. Interview with art historian GB] *Műértő*, 10 April 2007 issue.

<sup>11</sup> Forgács 2007. Op. cit. 313.

<sup>12</sup> Sármany-Parsons, Ilona: 'Marginalizált magyar festők, avagy egy közép-európai festészeti kánon kérdései' [Hungarian painter on the margin, or questions of the canon of Eastern European painting]. *Holmi*, 19. 2007. 3. 324.

According to Katalin Sinkó, we can move nearer to an understanding of the problem if we bear in mind that 'cultural transfer differs essentially from comparison, since it builds on the premise that there are no national cultures that have developed in an autochthonous way. These cultures have formed in the wake of influences, co-habitation, and motif adoption of many different kinds. Investigation of cultural transfers, then, places the emphasis on similarities existing in the social memory and not on differences. This is because "common cultural elements ease movement from one context to another", in other words, understanding.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Hungarian Fauves, Sinkó analyses the process of cultural transfer as follows:

The renaming of the "Neos" as "Hungarian Fauves" was, however, unable to take place until this change of designation had been legitimated by an exhibition in France. [...] The decisive step in this area was taken by the organisers of the show "Le fauvisme ou l'épreuve du feu", which opened in October 1999 at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. This exhibition, which dealt with painting in the period between 1905 and 1911, devoted a special section to artists working in Paris, Dresden, Munich, Prague, Budapest, and Moscow, as well as in Belgium, Switzerland, and Finland, who were in the circle of the French fauves or under their influence. [...] The fauve movement or trend was one that was built on the traditional centre-periphery approach taken by writings on French and European modern art. We can say that the modernisation of this concept has still not taken place.<sup>14</sup>

In essence, Sinkó agrees with Éva Forgács in that neither concept nor artistic practice can be transferred from one context to another without a modification of meaning. According to Sinkó:

in the background of reformulations and new names there are the less conscious processes of cultural transfer. In the course of these, French culture and Hungarian culture alike have been placed in the role of receiver. While works by Hungarian artists that were created under French influence, and the names of these artists also, are perhaps fixed in the narratives of French modernisms, the different time-horizon and the special characteristics of Hungarian and Central European history remain considerably outside the processes of this transfer. Generalising from our example, for a real understanding of the situation only the understanding of the concepts – in the present case, the different meanings of the expression "fauves" – can help. [...] The frame of this can only be "crossed history" (*histoire croisée*, to use Bénédicte Zimmermann's term), which can come into being through the bilateral investigation of processes. For the writing of history of this kind, it is necessary that in concrete situations the different national histories – in our case, the French art history and Hungarian art history – step out of the frames of national monocausality followed hitherto and, in the development of theories, take into account,

<sup>13</sup> Sinkó, Katalin: *Nemzeti Képtár. A Magyar Nemzeti Galéria története*. [Gallery of the Nation. The History of the Hungarian National Gallery] Budapest, 2009. 147.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

in a multilateral way, the earlier or actual determinedness of the historiography of the other nation. For example, to what extent are the ongoing processes of historical interpretation mirrors of cultural transfers, or are they sensitive indicators of the already complete crisis of the Europe ideal in both Central and Western Europe, or perhaps harbingers of the new nationalisms strengthening in the West, too, in the current situation?<sup>15</sup>

This provocative question remains unanswered. But in order to understand the operation of cultural transfer, it is enough to think of a connection that develops between two strangers. To begin with, they measure their similarities and a possible common basis. They instinctively seek out in their own histories those points which they can offer to each other for identification. In this phase, the smallest similarity can be the source of immeasurable joy. But when there is a common denominator, already the differences, too, can give them pleasure. Of course, relations are never perfectly equal and never perfectly mutual. The art history of the time around 1900 has been recorded by way of the narrative of progressivism, in the paradigm of the centre and the periphery. The model itself is historical. We can and should remark upon on the material of past in its capacity as such and we may emphasise different aspects of it. Nevertheless, the material of the past is malleable only up to a certain limit. The historical marker of the art of the era under discussion is progressivism: we would be ahistorical were we to divest it of this tag.

The expression 'Hungarian Fauves' is a proposal for a common denominator. Albeit differently and with different emphases, the Paris of Matisse was, at one and the same time, the Paris of the Hungarian painters, too. The name itself is a proposal; the meaning is already a variation on the name.

However, as far as the history of the Eight is concerned, it is not the common denominator, but the delight in the distinctive and the different that matters.

### **The reception of the Eight and the press**

As a fine arts example of the movements active in the different spheres of cultural life in Hungary between 1909 in 1912, the Eight group was a loosely organised, informal association, although its leader Károly Kernstok, who was known in the press largely on account of his organisational ability, mature years, and prestige, had clear views on what it represented and what its task should be in society. It was Ödön Márffy who, with hindsight, summarised its programme most succinctly: 'The joint or kindred endeavours of these artists could perhaps be formulated as follows, namely that they tried to make pictures according to strict principles by placing emphasis on composition, construction, shapes, drawing, and essence.'<sup>16</sup> Behind these endeavours, journalists and art critics, numbering just a handful but nevertheless highly effectual, organised and influenced the group's growing middle-class public, which was primarily drawn from the ranks of the urban intelligentsia. In the absence of a real art market,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>16</sup> Dévényi, Iván: 'Márffy Ödön levele a Nyolcak törekvéseiről' [Letter of ÖM about on the goals of the Eight]. *Művészet*, 10, 1969, 8. 10.

this public purchased works by the group members on a patronage basis, measured their accomplishment in the light of its political-ideological alignment and intellectual preconceptions, which was at the same time the undertaking of a social role. The unique features of their art were for a long time engraved on the countenance of a small yet powerful public; in turn, the mimicry and gestures of this public influenced their art, and, through mediation, have – down to the present day – determined the artistic orientation and approach to forms of generations. Éva Körner, who coined the term '*avant-garde* without isms', considers *convergence* to be the main characteristic of the period under discussion, but also calls attention to the distinctively Hungarian features of the process of bourgeois transformation:

In the 1910s, large-scale social co-operation was characteristic of intellectual life in Hungary, from the socio-political movements through the transformation of the system of philosophical thought to the fashioning of forms in art. For the time being, intellectual solidarity prevailed; the cracks, and later the splits, that emerge during times of ordeals in political life had not yet appeared. [...] It was not by chance that for the first time in Hungary culture acquired a new meaning, one orientated towards the living of life in a more just and true way, because never in Hungary did the system of middle-class values, and grounded in it the specialist branches of learning, taken root to such an extent that the desire for a different, more just and true life was erased.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, cracks appeared well before the paths finally diverged. Intense solidarity characterised the Eight only at the end of 1910 and the beginning of 1911: many of the members failed to take part in the group's third exhibition, which was held in 1912. Kernstok lost his leading role and left the group. When we speak of the Eight, in a certain sense we are speaking about an effective fiction, but this vision or fantasy regarding a community created ensembles of art works of emblematic significance, moreover with matchless vehemence for art as a whole. In connection with the Eight, it is primarily paintings that we think of, although the members displayed sculptures and even applied art creations. At their third show, Berény exhibited, in addition to a writing-case, eight women's handbags, hangings, and eight pillow-case embroideries. From their circle, Anna Lesznai also produced high-standard embroideries. Capable of being pieced together from entries in her diary, her ideas concerning decoration were also significant. Many of the members of the Eight could play a musical instrument. Róbert Berény, an all-rounder in the group and the other leading figure besides Kernstok, not only understood mathematics, but also wrote music criticism; indeed, he also composed music, and not just on any level.

Seen through today's eyes, the press campaign surrounding the Eight reached enormous dimensions, even if ample contributions appeared by conservative writers. During the scientific preparations for the exhibition, Árpád Tímár published, in a three-volume collection of sources, more than 1500 pages of articles and reviews from the press response of the time to

<sup>17</sup> Körner, Éva: 'Lovasok a vízparton – Fekete négyzet fehér alapon' [Horsemen at the Water – Black square on a white surface]. [1984] – Idem: *Avantgárd – izmusokkal és izmusok nélkül. Válogatott cikkek és tanulmányok*. Szerk. Aknai Katalin, Hornyik Sándor. Budapest, 2005. 318.

progressivism in Hungary in the early twentieth century. This huge amount was – leaving out of account the anonymous newspaper contributors on the subject – produced by a few dozen individuals, including such devoted or well-disposed supporters of the Eight as Aladár Bálint, Artúr Bárdos, György Bölöni, Andor Cserna, József Diner-Dénes, Géza Feleky, Zoltán Felvinczi Takács, Ödön Geró, Géza Lengyel, Pál Relle, Béla Revész, and Dezső Rózsaffy. With regard to those in the field of theory, special mention may be made of Géza Feleky, who wrote the introduction to the Eight's second catalogue, and György Bölöni, who followed their activity in Paris and from Paris and who organised exhibitions for them. The most powerful support, however, came from a poet and a philosopher respectively: Endre Ady and György Lukács represented a broad guarantee for the acknowledgement of the merits of their work.

### **The reception of Matisse and the influence of German theory**

Behind György (Georg) Lukács was the sophisticated, distinguished figure of Leó Popper, a brilliant critic who died young, a few months after the Eight's second exhibition. In the twenty-five years of his life, he published a total of twelve short pieces. Of these, only a few were on fine art subjects. These influenced neither Hungarian art, nor the Sunday Circle, which, continued, with philosophical force, the lines of thought begun by artists in the years of the First World War. On the other hand, he did exert an influence on his friend György Lukács, not only inspiring his thinking, but guiding, up to his death, the morality of that thinking by means of well-disposed criticisms, in the course of their correspondence, their joint articles, and their translations. Nevertheless, in 1919, at the time of the dramatic turn represented by the Hungarian Soviet Republic, there occurred what Popper had so much feared:

For Lukács, art was apocalyptic power. It was exciting, but, for that very reason, dangerous. The recognition that the forms of art needed to be regulated was, therefore, a matter of time only. Popper – with his utopian notions – was, as we shall see, a man of liberty; in Lukács, however, there already lurked the commissar who dreamt of apocalyptic powers for himself, which, in due course, he would firmly withstand.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most sincere manifestations of this desire to regulate appears in Lukács's work, 'The roads parted', a response to 'Inquisitive Art',<sup>19</sup> Kernstok's text setting out a programme for the Eight. In his article, Lukács defined form as follows: 'Form is the principle of evaluation, of differentiation, and of the creation of order.'<sup>20</sup> In the best moments of his philosophical career, Lukács could have experienced how his thought sequences were dictated by a kind of inspired necessity: Lukács was capable of seeing this on a theoretical level, but never on an emotional one. Accordingly, the form concept, despite every endeavour on the part of his friend, from time to time degenerated in Lukács's hands into a genre category, or else acquired the shape of a dogmatic metaphysical imperative. On the other hand, Leó Popper still knew that form involves

<sup>18</sup> Pernecky, Géza: 'Leó és a formák' [Leo and the forms]. *Buksz*, 5. 1993. 409.

<sup>19</sup> Kernstok, Károly: 'A kutató művészet' [Inquisitive art]. *Nyugat*, 3. 1910. I.: 95. – *Az Utak* II.: 288–292.

<sup>20</sup> Lukács, György: 'Az utak elváltak' [The roads parted]. *Nyugat*, 3. 1910. I.: 190–193. – *Az Utak* II.: 321.



risking, and that we can understand the independent and unbridled intentions of form only when we are capable of giving up the 'security given by full understanding' for 'the type of uncertain adventuring' which leads us to 'the most secret and most unlikely realms of form, towards deeper truth'.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, philosophy – and in the given historical moment left-wing, bourgeois thinking, too – had no need more pressing than this 'full understanding'. The Lukácsian demand for an exact discipline bent to the yoke of categorisations, systemicism, and definitions cannot be reconciled with any kind of adventuring that is risky and uncertain in outcome.

Just as Popper's 'Let the will of form prevail' and Lukács's formal strictness denoted diverging paths, the Eight, too, cannot be reduced to a common denominator: the artists in question followed their inner lines of bearing. As regards reception and frame of interpretation, the Popperian liberty ideal was not a realistic alternative to the ideas of Lukács and his supporters, as, one by one, the Hungarian painters had their French orientation recoded through the influence of German theory, which in Hungary followed on from geopolitical and historical factors. Their reception in the country was determined by art critics who had read the German art historians, primarily Meier-Graefe. The German cultural circle held sway over Popper's formulations, too, and decisively: the keenest indication of this was its criticisms in connection with Fauvism. However, all this does not mean that the political and artistic ideas of Kernstok, who was especially critical of German art, would have prevailed. The members of the Eight were autonomous artists who did not remain together for long, because their views and interests could not be lastingly reconciled. For each of them, Paris meant something different, principally a technique, i.e. acquisition of skills and the reinterpretation of means.

It is no coincidence that it is precisely to this period and to Leó Popper that the so-called double-misunderstanding theory is connected. A summary of it has survived as a fragment, as follows:

*Proposition:* The principal factor in the development of art is misunderstanding.

*Argument:* Development consists of the influence (including inherited influences) of people and periods on each other. However, since man cannot know his fellow-man from within and cannot understand what it is that his fellow-man wants, across historical period to period still less (since finding out is impossible), when, nevertheless, he receives what he sees, he does so wrongly, misunderstanding it, and preparing the ground for new misunderstandings.<sup>22</sup>

Popper's idea was processed by Lukács as follows:

The existence of a work can be understood without confusion only when we regard the misunderstanding of it as the sole possible direct communication form: how a world comes into being from a double misunderstanding (from the misunderstanding of

<sup>21</sup> Hévízi, Ottó: 'A forma mint szabadakarat. Popper Leó esztétikája' [The forms free will in the aesthetics of Leo Popper]. *Világosság*, 28. 1987. 397.

<sup>22</sup> Popper, Leó: *Esszék és kritikák*. [Essays and criticisms] Ed. By Tímár, Árpád. Budapest, 1983. 116

“term” and “understanding”) which on the one hand one cannot adequately achieve from one of them but which, however, is in a necessary, normative connection with both is already merely a problem that has to be solved, and not an incomprehensible phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

Not long after Berényi and his circle, we find Popper in Paris. The young man, who had contracted tuberculosis while young, certainly turned up and made sketches at the Matisse Academy, although his letters attest that he also took part in training more systematic and more thorough than this. On 20 May 1909, he informed his friend Lukács: ‘I have enrolled at the modelling department. And it was a clever thing to do, because I’m learning an incredible amount there: at one and the same time drawing and architecture, anatomy and painting, dynamics and metaphysics, and singing, and how to write articles and art history, as well as Swedish gymnastics, the theory of knowledge, and ju-jitsu.’<sup>24</sup> A few weeks later he was already writing from Wengen in Switzerland: ‘I made a model of an amazing mulatto woman, a little creature from Martinique, who taught me more in a week than fifty Jean-Paul Laurenses or Matisses could have done.’<sup>25</sup>

Popper read forthwith the programme-announcing – or, more precisely, programme-changing – piece published by Matisse, the *fauve-chef*, in the journal *Grande revue*. This article appeared in Hungarian in 1911 entitled ‘Remarks by a Painter’, in the periodical *A Ház*.<sup>26</sup> The text was of enormous importance from the point of view of Matisse’s reception in Hungary. In his ‘Letter from Paris’, a piece written in early 1909 that likewise remained unpublished and which was probably shared only with Lukács, Popper sums up its lessons as follows:

The path of today’s painting leads to peace. It leads out of the stylistic chaos of impressionism and towards a solidly based calm art which, no matter how it manifests itself, is the brother of architecture: it carries in itself the features of profound security and equilibrium of which it is the embodiment. And, on paths that are concealed, the old order returns: the immobile or mobile sacred order of the Greeks and the Oriental peoples.<sup>27</sup>

Here Popper makes reference to Matisse’s concept change, which the leader of the French fauves announced as follows:

With colours, one can achieve beautiful effects, insofar as one relies on their belonging together or their lack of this. Often, when I start working, it is the new and superficial

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46, 47.

<sup>24</sup> *Diálogo a művészetről. Popper Leó írásai. Popper Leó és Lukács György levelezése.* [A dialogue on art. The writings of L.P. The correspondence of L. P and Gy. L.] Ed. And introduced by Hévizi, Ottó, Tímár, Árpád. Budapest, 1993. 271.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>26</sup> Matisse, Henri: ‘Egy festő feljegyzései’ [Notes of a painter]. *A Ház*, 4. 1911. 187–200.

<sup>27</sup> Popper 1983. Op. cit. 53.

effects that I first catch. A few years before, I was content with this result [...]. I should like to achieve the condition stemming from the concentration of feelings that makes a picture a picture. [...] Earlier, I did not leave my pictures on the wall, because they reminded me of moments of overwrought excitability and I was not happy to look at them when I was in a calm state of mind. Now it is calm that I am trying to invest in them, and I shall get them out again and again until I achieve my goal. [...] Behind this succession of motifs, which constitutes the passing existence of living beings and things, and which lends them changing forms of appearance, we must seek a truer, more essential character, to which the artist will accommodate, in order to give a more enduring picture of what is real.<sup>28</sup>

Having read Matisse's declaration, Popper winced. 'Peace today is still present for people only in programmes. [...] It has not yet come – there is no "realm of peace" –, and it will not come at all as long as things go on as they are now: as long as the difference between the artist's intentions and his deeds is greater than between his deeds and those of his opponent. In actual fact, this difference is such that we see as clear opposites things that in great art are one and the same: form and content. They are going towards the great peace with the form of great confusion.'<sup>29</sup> Popper, who can be termed a liberal almost in the French sense in comparison with Lukács, found Matisse's turn towards classicism unsatisfactory and instead considered the example of Cézanne and Aristide Maillol the one to follow. In a number of places, the authors of the Hungarian Fauves catalogue called attention to the fact that in Paris the Hungarians had encountered Matisse's 'tamed' fauvism' at the same time as they encountered cubism, which was then gaining more and more ground. The same process ran its course among Matisse's German followers: 'In the works of young painters liberated from the school of Matisse, during the time of cubism, Cézanne's influence strengthened further in Paris. This occurred in Berlin, too, when in 1909–10 pictures by Cézanne featured at a number of exhibitions. Instead of loud colours, there were stable forms, and in an era of growing confusion discipline and concentrated picture-building received new emphasis.'<sup>30</sup> However, this generally characteristic structural change meant different things in the different regions of Europe. Passing through a succession of cultural filters wedged not between intention and expression, but also between expression and understanding, very many opportunities for misunderstanding presented themselves. What a painter could acquire from Matisse was a mass of skills which could be understood as a kind of procedural system only in the context of the history of French visual culture. And at the same time this meant that the Hungarians arrived in Paris with a vision formed in advance by the procedural systems of their own visual culture. For their part, these systems determined in advance what they would acquire and receive. The restorator Gyula Kemény, an 'honorary' member of the research group, drew up a list showing – paradoxically – which French

<sup>28</sup> Matisse 1911. Op. cit. 188.

<sup>29</sup> Popper 1983. Op. cit. 54.

<sup>30</sup> R. Bajkay, Éva: 'Magyar és német kapcsolatok Matisse nyomán' [Hungarian – German connection in the footsteps of Matisse]. In: *Nulla dies sine linea. Tanulmányok Passuth Krisztina hetvenedik születésnapjára*. Szerk. Berecz Ágnes, L. Molnár Mária, Tatai Erzsébet. Budapest, 2007. 94.

influences could have contributed to the preservation of Hungarian traditions:

1. They encountered brushwork with generous use of paint also on Van Gogh's surfaces transubstantiated by way of expressivity; 2. Decorative, two-dimensional surfaces and calligraphic outlining, a tradition known from the Hungarian Secession, made Gauguinesque formal elements easily comprehensible; 3. The strong plastic approach did not appear as a necessarily outworn tradition, since after 1907, with the spread of cubism, Cézanne's system of drafting spatially and organising mass again became topical.<sup>31</sup>

### The reception of Cézanne

Károly Kernstok, who cultivated an ever deepening friendship with Oszkár Jászi, the constantly self-renewing, politically very active leader of middle-class radicals (who even gave a lecture on the Eight)<sup>32</sup> was, after Berényi, the other rallying point for the company of the Eight. In his memoirs, Lajos Bálint wrote of Kernstok as follows:

In outer appearance and in his entire manner he was an attractive figure. When he appeared somewhere, he became, almost involuntarily, the centre of the company. With his blond beard, bright blue eyes, and irresistible smile, he was sometimes reminiscent of some legendary prophet. Had he utilised these qualities for his own purposes alone, he would, clearly, have enhanced his success as a painter. But – in the first half of his life at least – he was a rebel. I have often asked myself whether political life itself was of greater interest to him than his calling as a painter. [...] However many new principles or experiments appeared, with his lucid intelligence and his excellent professional training he immediately tried them out, but only for so long. Even in his most interesting phases, in his pictures depicting large equestrian groups, he was unable to remain in the experimental style long enough to cast the strongly outlined galloping nudes built on structures of bundles of powerful muscles in the form final. [...] He was already around thirty when, along with successes achieved, he abruptly turned his back on his entire output as a painter up until then and set out on his quest in the world of the 'Neos'. If the Eight respected him as their leader, this esteem did not extend to their following him in his quick changes. [...] The reality is that without the assistance of the critics and that part of the public that stood behind them, they would never have obtained a hearing in the storm that they generated with their first appearance. I myself was present at that meeting of the Galileo Circle at which Kernstok delivered his lecture entitled 'Inquisitive Art'. The essence of this canvassing address was the opposition between the art of the emotions and the art of the intellect. He established a connection between the radical

<sup>31</sup> Kemény, Gyula: 'Francia nyomvonalak a magyar Vadak és a neósok festészetében. Egy restaurátor feljegyzései' [French tracks in the painting of the H. fauves and 'neós'. Notes of a restaurator]. *Hungarian Fauves* 2006. Op. cit. 186.

<sup>32</sup> 'Felolvasás a Nyolcak kiállításán' [Lecture at the exhibition of the Eight. [*Pesti Hírlap*, 29 November 1912 issue. 26 – *Az Utak* III.: 496.

programme of the Circle and the essence of the new art. [...] Increasing numbers of people were becoming interested in the art of the Eight, primarily that section of the public which was grouped around the Galileo Circle and the periodical *Husztodik Század*, and later on around the journal *Nyugat*. This section already celebrated Ady, attended with interest the musical manifestations of Bartók and Kodály, and subsequently the new developments in painting and sculpture, too.<sup>33</sup>

Having been obliged to leave Hungary following the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Károly Kernstok wrote from Berlin to Gyula Kosztolányi Kann on 31 October 1920: 'Manet's mission was to dismantle tradition, Delacroix's to provide bold ideas, Cézanne's to lead one to the specific in the individual, and those after him to show freedom of emotions and means in the interests of a goal. The rawest colour is permissible, the bluntest *valeur* is permissible, the most individual manner of drawing is permissible, and every synthesis is permissible, only there must be a goal.'<sup>34</sup>

It is worth stopping for a moment and pondering why it was that Kernstok stressed subjectivity in connection with Cézanne's highly objective art. One of the most interesting products of the reception of Cézanne in Hungary was a study by the critic Géza Feleky entitled 'The Legacy of Cézanne'. According to Feleky, at a time

when art is no longer being produced socially but is instead individual discovery, and when every true artist is a revolutionary being on account of necessity and not of temperament, Eastern art is losing its exotic character and Western art – by virtue of its anthropocentric world-view a necessarily three-dimensional art – is acknowledging, in the most confused and most critical period of its history, the legitimacy of two-dimensional art. This is an indication and consequence of the fact that art is no longer an essential need of Western man, or rather that art, not longer performing its essential mission, is already a thing of pleasure and not a thing that is necessary.<sup>35</sup>

Behold an 'end of art' idea from 1911, one that is connected with the wish to surpass the ideas of subjectivity and individualism.

In the centre of Feleky's analysis of Cézanne is the problem of the two-dimensional plane and the three-dimensional space, and also that of the thrusting together of chaos and order:

Cezanne, then, did not just create space, mass, and the structure-like fitting together of different masses from nothing, from shades of colour, from degrees of atmospheric moistness, and from other tonal differences; in his pictures, order emerges from disorder. But the acknowledgment of several points of view, deconstructs the picture only in one direction and leads only seemingly to disorder. [...] Hence, the picture surface is uneven,

<sup>33</sup> Bálint, Lajos: *Ecset és véső*. [Brush and chisel]. Budapest, 1973. 118, 120, 122, 123.

<sup>34</sup> The repository holding the letter: MTA MKI Adattár, Isz.: MDK-C-I-17/2026.

<sup>35</sup> Feleky, Géza: 'Cézanne hagyatéka' [The legacy of C.]. In: idem: *Könyvek, képek, évek*. Budapest, 1912. 16. First published in the periodical *Nyugat*: 4. 1911. I.: 749–754.

contradictory, anarchic, and chaotic. Nevertheless, it achieves its goal, because the vision appears in a clear way through the help of the unclear means. These visions are calm and logical: there are clear balances between the clearly outlined masses and also clear, counterbalanced movements. The technique, however, is intuitive; from time to time, very different means add to the tonal differences.<sup>36</sup>

The 'very different means' and their various misunderstandings in the art of Hungarians, e.g. Tihanyi, are analysed by Gyula Kemény, in the course of picture analogies.

In 2000, an outstanding Cézanne exhibition was staged at the Kunstforum Wien that bore the eloquent sub-title 'Vollendet, unvollendet'.<sup>37</sup> In the course of the different phases represented by the pictures, it was possible to observe how Cézanne struggled with the organising principle of organised chaos: what he left open and how much space he assigned to the accidental, what he attended to or constructed and how much, and whether from processes that were almost infinite he put together art works that could be described as finished. In the case of the Hungarian painters, instead of thinking oriented to the future, concentration on the past, on the completeness of the composition, was more characteristic: in this the rise of psychoanalysis in Hungary would have an increasingly significant role. Berény spoke rather of memories when he defined himself in comparison with the futurists:

The increase in the elements of composition means the development of painting from now on. These elements – memories and emotions – are parts of the painter's soul.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Kernstok, in 'Inquisitive Art', trusts in the preservation of traditions: 'The reaction to our little exhibition just now was, as far as I know, much greater than the one we envisaged on the basis of its modest funding. The progressive ones among those who make up our public [...] felt that that if this was not the end, the final product, of a big journey, but rather the beginning of a long road on which we should go forward *proceeding from traditions*, in order to seek and find those new great values which in essence will be very much akin to those of the good art of every era.'<sup>39</sup>

Nothing in the seemingly shared substructure shows better the different approaches of Berény and Kernstok than the difference in their works. In the field of graphic art, it was they, of all the members of the Eight, who created perhaps the most enduring works. It is worth looking at two drawings of heads by them one after the other. Both are fine works composed in a balanced way. The Kernstok work, kept at Sümeg, is a cool depiction showing an almost androgenic character and radiating timeless calm, while in the Berény piece the face of the female figure is disfigured by emotions; snake-like, her mouth is wincing, and she is looking at

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Cézanne – vollendet, unvollendet*. Hrsg. von Felix Baumann, Evelin Benesch. Wien: Kunstforum Bank Austria, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Berény, Róbert: 'A Nemzeti Szalonbeli képekről' [Ont he picture at the National Salon]. *Nyugat*, 6. 1913. I.: 197–198.

<sup>39</sup> Kernstok 1910. Op. cit. – *Az Utak* II.: 288.

us contemptuously out of the corners of her eyes, which are in slits that are deliberately asymmetrical. Her whole being is torn asunder by tension. The difference is perhaps even more striking when we compare another work by Kernstok, a harmonious, classically calm depiction of a man with an expressive brow and folded arms, with a 1911 Berény seated female nude now kept in the Graphic Art Collection at Budapest's University of Fine Arts. On the latter work, one can clearly see – besides the attempt at a closed composition – that Berény was more excited than any other member of the Eight by Cézanne-type superintended chaos; except that he focused chiefly on the psychic and emotional, that is the energy of pathos.

When speaking of Kernstok's drawings, again it was Feleky who named the difference between the two extremes the most tellingly:

Bernard Berenson published, in two enormous volumes, beautiful reproductions of drawings of this kind by Florentine painters. Perhaps not even his keen eye and splendid critical sense would, at first glance, think Kernstok's drawings of nudes out of place in this collection. What the drawings have in common is an undisguised emphasising of centres of movement and of intersections. Drawing is the art of and omission. At the end of their lives, one or two old masters – every true painter's language of forms develops from complexity towards simplicity – contented themselves with dominant details. It seems that the great synthetic power manifest in their drawings is the stage preceding Kernstok's highest synthesis, his ultimate simplification. But Kernstok commits to paper only the movement and structive nodes, and surrounds them with a one-stroke outlining. The Florentine way of seeing things cannot get that far. Behind *Quattrocentro* painting stood the sculptor Donatello: he, just like his painter colleagues, asserted the structural connection only within the decorative body unit, emphasising, so to speak, the organic nature of the decoration. For Kernstok's manner of seeing, it is necessary to seek analogies in the work of the elderly Rodin or in that of Maillol. Even then there remains the affinity between the graphic art of Florence and that of Kernstok.<sup>40</sup>

At the end of his train of thought, in which he refers to Kernstok's social commitment, Feleky tactfully quotes from a letter of Van Gogh:

Giotto and Cimabue lived in an obelisk-like environment where everything was placed on architectonic foundations, where individual uniqueness was the stone of the building and where everything rested on everything else and created the monumental order of society. If the socialists would construct their buildings in a logical way – today they are still a long way from doing this –, then this social order would revive again in a similar form. We, however, are living in the midst of complete anarchy and lack of discipline.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Feleky, Géza: 'Szélsőjegyzetek Kernstock képeihez' [On the margin of Kernstok's pictures]. *Nyugat*, 1910. I.: 195–198. – *Az Utak* II.: 325.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

**The reception of Adolf Hildebrand – *The Problem of Form in Fine Art* (1893)**

A utopian ideology containing connections between structured picture-building and the restructuring of society – and between essence focused artistic form and man remaking himself – had by this time come into being in the hands of Kernstok, who operated with Hildebrand's terminology. Kernstok's speech, famous but – typically for an artist's approach offering only sensory-emotional connections – was György (Georg) Lukács by a concrete programme text, in which Popperian ideas were already to be found in a form that was a good deal more doctrinaire and aggressive, but undoubtedly more elaborated.<sup>42</sup>

Lukács, in his lecture *The roads parted* delivered to the Galileo Circle, practically quoted (without giving any kind of reference) the words written by Popper in his Matisse article, applying them to the works of Kernstok rather than to those of the French fauves:

These pictures bring calm, peace, relaxation, and harmony – that they could shock anyone is completely incomprehensible. [...] Here it is not the success of a new art that is the issue, but the resurrection once again of old art, of art, and about the life-and-death struggle against the new, modern art that this resurrection brought about. Károly Kernstok has said what the issue is here. That those pictures that he and his friends paint (and those poetic works created by a couple of poets, and those philosophies brought into being by a couple of thinkers) want to express the essence of things. The essence of things! With these simple words, avoiding polemics, the material of the great debate is indicated, and also the point at which the paths diverge.<sup>43</sup>

Written in 1908 and already quoted, Popper's words on equilibrium and calm art on a solid base were interpreted in 1910 by Lukács as follows: 'This art is the old art, the art of order and values. Impressionism made everything a decorative surface [...]. The new art is architectonic in the old and true sense of the term. Its colours, words, and lines are just means for the expression of essence, order and harmony, the weight and equilibrium of things.'<sup>44</sup> One possible source for these ideas can be found in the introduction to Adolf Hildebrand's successful 1893 book *The Problem of Form in Fine Art* (translated by János (Johannes) Wilde):

While the issue here is the imitative, in fine art a kind of research into nature is concealed, and it is to this that the work of the artist is linked. The problems which form places before the artist in this are supplied by nature and dictated by perception. If just these problems happen upon solution, i.e. if just in this relation the work has existence, then also, as a work in itself, it has not become an independent whole which could speak

<sup>42</sup> For the connection between Popper and Lukács in more detail, see Markója, Csilla: 'Popper Leó (1886–1911)'. In: *"Emberk, és nem frakkok". A magyar művészettörténet-írás nagy alakjai. Tudománytörténeti esszégyűjtemény.* II. Szerk. Bardoly István, Markója Csilla. *Enigma*, 13. 2006. No. 48. 263–284. For quotations concerning Hildebrand: 270–271; 277–278.

<sup>43</sup> Lukács 1910. Op. cit. – *Az Utak* II.: 320.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.



in favour of nature or against it. In order to achieve this, its imitative content – in its development from the wider point of view – has to be raised to a higher realm of art. I would call this point of view *architectonic*, not concerning myself, naturally, with the ordinary specialist meaning of the word architecture. A dramatic play or a symphony has this kind of architecture, this kind of inner structure, an organic totality of relations, as does a picture or a sculpture, even when individual branches of art are living in completely separate worlds of form. Problems of form emerging in tandem with such an architectonic shaping of an art work do not arise from nature and are not self-evident; nevertheless, it is precisely these that are absolutely artistic. Architectonic shaping is that which creates a higher-order in art work from the artistic researching of nature.<sup>45</sup>

The passage quoted from Hildebrand is one of the nearest sources of another of Popper's ideas, namely the notion of art as a mode of being 'of a different God', a mode of being in parallel with nature. Similarly to Károly Kernstok's lecture, the title of which, too, 'Inquisitive art', was borrowed from Hildebrand:

The arts, painting let's say, always start out from nature. [...] That is to say, the means with which the painter works and those with which nature works are very, very, different. [...] In vain do we sit before nature in order to copy it like a *camera obscura*: there is no light-sensitive plate in us; in vain do we wish to paint the colours as we see them: we have no sunlight in us. There is, it is true, something that we have as human beings which in its significance is of equal value to these things, namely our intelligence. [...] This, this nature [i.e. those things that have bodies – Cs. M.] must be called upon to help and must be interpreted.<sup>46</sup>

As a matter of fact, the ideas of Lukács, who was conducting an ideological war, and Kernstok, who was seeking autonomous artistic solutions, were brought to a common denominator by their joint hostility to impressionism. The reclaiming of 'old art' (e.g. that of the Greeks) meant on the one hand the demand for tradition and continuity, and on the other an idealistic philosophy directed towards a metaphysics that hypothesised its own viewpoint in the absolute. After the failure of Simmel's experiment to discover something of substance in impressionism (an example of this was Simmel's first Rodin analysis, a critique of which was given by Popper in his essay 'Sculpture, Rodin, and Maillol'; it is not a coincidence that in his obituary for Simmel in 1918 Lukács mentions their one-time teacher as follows: 'He was the Monet of philosophy, whom so far no Cézanne has followed.'<sup>47</sup>), an equals sign was placed between impressionism and a metaphysics-free world.

For example, so it was in the work of the above-mentioned Géza Feleky also, to whose

<sup>45</sup> Hildebrand, Adolf: *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (1893). Hungarian trans. Wilde János. Budapest, 1910. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Kernstok 1910. Op. cit. – *Az Utak* II.: 289, 290.

<sup>47</sup> Lukács, György: 'Georg Simmel'. *Pester Lloyd*, 2 October 1918. issue. Republished in Lukács 1977. Op. cit. 746–751. Quotation: 748.

Kernstok article published in *Nyugat* in 1910 Popper reacted in a letter written from Berlin on 6 February 1910: 'As well as you, Géza Feleky writes very cleverly about the Kernstok things. Indeed, and this is the greatest acclamation, he says a couple of things which I myself wanted to write; instead of these, I shall now be forced to serve up something even more brilliant.'<sup>48</sup> Here, Popper is perhaps referring to the article which he was to have written on the Eight's exhibition in Berlin for the periodical *Kunst und Künstler*. This piece was, unfortunately, never produced (or, if it was, we do not know about it), although its basis would probably have been the 'Impressionismus-Tektonismus' difference. According to Tímár, this was precisely the term by means of which Popper could have contributed significantly to the art criticism of the day. In connection with the terminological debates that became more lively following the 'Hungarian Fauves' exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery, it is worth reminding ourselves that

The name tectonism is very fortunate, on the one hand because the everyday meaning of the expression is in harmony with the essential characteristics of the artistic endeavours indicated, and on the other hand because this term isolates something for which contemporary criticism had no special term, and for which art history scholarship since then has had no special term either.<sup>49</sup>

### The place of the Eight

In the differences between the theoretical and moral approaches of Popper and Lukács we can glimpse the essential difference between the *open* art of Cézanne and the art of the Eight which was soon *closed*. However, to analyse the approaches adopted by eight different artists in the theoretical force fields of two thinkers in itself an act of violence. 'These people here did not come together in a school; it cannot be said of them that Kernstok is their teacher. [...] They are travelling on roads whose direction is still unknown and whose destination no-one can yet know,' wrote the newspaper *Népszava* in connection with their first exhibition, namely 'New Pictures'.<sup>50</sup> Éva Forgács's hypothesis quoted at the beginning of this study – this held that every artistic phenomenon can be understood only in its social embeddedness, in its own historical tradition, and in its cultural context – is especially warranted in the case of the Eight. Károly Kernstok's strong political commitment to the middle-class radicals and the freemasons influenced the members of the group (to different degrees, admittedly), but his undertaking of this role, or the pathetic energy that stemmed from this choice, determined the contemporary reception of the works rather than the works themselves. The activity of Oszkár Jászi, cultivating

<sup>48</sup> Popper – Lukács 1993. Op. cit. 328. For the article in question, see Feleky, Géza: 'Szélgjegyzetek Kernstok képeihez' [On the margin of painting by K.] *Nyugat*, 3. 1910. I.: 195–198. – *Az Utak* II.: 323–326.

<sup>49</sup> Tímár, Árpád: 'Élmény és teória. Adalékok Popper Leó művészetelméletének keletkezéstörténetéhez' [Experience and theory. On the origin history of L.P.'s art theory] In: *Lehetséges-e egyáltalán? Márkus Györgynek tanítóányai*. Szerk. Háy, János. A szöveget gondozta és a bibliográfiát készítette: Erdélyi, Ágnes; Lakatos, András. Budapest, 1994. 429.

<sup>50</sup> (vd) [Várnai, Dániel]: 'Új képek' [New Pictures]. *Népszava*, 31 December 1909 issue. 5. – *Az Utak* II.: 230.

friendly contacts with Károly Kernstok and with his sculptor relative Márk Vedres, has again come to the forefront of research.

A characteristic of middle-class radicalism as a way of thinking is a metapolitical commitment, which means that the questions of practice are judged by philosophy, from the standpoint of theory. For this reason, a necessary concomitant of it is a “semantic rationalism”, which pictures reality in models, and wants to tailor concrete conditions and actors to these models. [...] Middle-class radicalism is a socialist standpoint, a left-wing critique which is directed towards the superseding of liberalism, and conducts the critique of capitalism from the position of a post-capitalist – in other words, a socialist – order. But here we shall make two necessary restrictions: both the concept of socialism and the picture of capitalism are flexible.<sup>51</sup>

The movement of the middle-class radicals failed, and, along with Kernstok, Oszkár Jászi, too, was obliged to emigrate after 1919. Both came into conflict with György (Georg) Lukács’s ideologemes put into effect at the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919). However, the ‘schematic rationalism’ of the middle-class radicals and their theoretical presuppositions developed together, in fruitful reciprocity with the progressive literary and artistic movements of the age. This historic exchange of ideas left its mark on Kernstok’s and his associates’ art, which was sometimes style-breaking, sometimes style-securing,<sup>52</sup> sometimes schematic, and sometimes biddable.

If we are to proceed from this approach, we must acknowledge that somewhere between the dead naturalist painting of nature and the reshaped presentation of phenomena given by nature runs a perilous borderland. We must acknowledge naturalist paintings that have inspired us and those that inspire us now, and we must acknowledge nature-altering, stylised pictures that have filled us with artistic joy. It does not, therefore, depend on the trend. But precisely from this we see that in the interpretation of nature vague boundaries lurk in some places, and we sense, too, that every artistic work that expresses truly noble joy in human beings takes shape between these limits that are vague and not precisely set by any aesthetic. But who dares to say to a painter “This far and no further”? For this there is only one forum enjoying full legitimacy: the painter’s talent, his fine feelings.<sup>53</sup>

*The tact of the painter* – Károly Lyka’s beautiful expression condenses in itself everything that is comprehensively characteristic of the Eight. Plastic art was theirs, powerful, bold, in the

<sup>51</sup> G. Fodor, Gábor: *Gondoljuk újra a polgári radikálisokat* [Let us reconsider the radical middle-class]. Budapest, 2004. 148-149. See also the relevant publications of György Litván.

<sup>52</sup> Gyula Kemény describes the first two ‘as a undoing and as a doing up’ in his above-mentioned study published in the present volume.

<sup>53</sup> Lyka, Károly: ‘A MIÉNK bemutatója’ [The show of MIÉNK]. *Új Idők*, 21 February 1909 issue. 190–191. – *Az Utak* II.: 28.

collision zone of two- and three-dimensionality, experimenting with the metaphysics of the body, with rhythm, decoration, primitivism, musicality, and abstraction: everything depended on their sense of proportion.

Their art is neither avant-garde nor the sum or permutation of French or German influences. Instead, it is an organic local outcome of Hungarian capabilities, an art which had an antecedent, and which even achieved a paradoxical continuation in the Arcadian painting of the 1920s. In the history of Hungarian modernism since 1867, theirs was the change that finally liberated art from the constraints of mimetic, mapping, vision: in the nature seen and recomposed by them we can acquaint ourselves with our own creative strength and with the demons that threaten it.

The introduction to the catalogue for the Los Angeles exhibition 'Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation 1910–1930',<sup>54</sup> which was exemplary in its depiction of the 'pan-European horizon', was written by Péter Nádas, who spoke of the possibilities for cultural transfer. Its title of the introduction was itself eloquent: *Cautious Determination of the Location*. The sub-title, on the other hand, revealed what would later lie at the heart of the discussion: *We thoroughly investigate a single wild-pear tree*.

The Eight group stands before us in the centre of one possible narrative of our own art history. It is rather like the Hungarian writer's wild-pear tree that pushed its roots into the soil of a given garden, a given village, a larger district, and a historical region, while generating year-ring waves in an ever-extending space and time.

Translated by Chris Sullivan (Pittsburgh)

**Csilla Markója**, PhD, is Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Research Group on Art Historiography, Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, chief editor of the art historical journal *Enigma* ([www.meridiankiado.hu](http://www.meridiankiado.hu)), which is mainly devoted to publishing diaries, letters, and other sources (Anna Zádor I-IV, Tibor Gerevich I-III, János Wilde I-IV, János György Szilágyi I-III). She has published two monographs (László Mednyánszky 2008, Péter Nádas 2016), and her book on Hungarian art historiography 1910-1945 is forthcoming. She is a member of the 'Hungarian Fauves and the Eight' research group and researcher of the Sunday Circle. She edited vols. I-V of *Great figures of Hungarian art historiography*, and the bilingual edition of Ernő Kállai's oeuvre. She has nearly 200 publications on, amongst others, György Lukács, Anna Lesznai, Arnold Hauser, Leó Popper.

markoja.csilla@btk.mta.hu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

<sup>54</sup> *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation 1910–1930*. Ed. by Timothy O. Benson. Cambridge, Mass.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002.