

# **May '68 in literature and theory: The last season of modernism (Introduction)**

Marko Juvan, ZRC SAZU

## **1968: An attempt at the world revolution**

May 1968 in Paris is the emblem of the student-labor revolt, a polycentric and anarchical attempt at a world revolution in the 1960s and early 70s, that is, a period called “the long '68.”<sup>1</sup> Among the many ideals of the global uprising were social equality, freedom, direct democracy, international peace, racial, ethnic, and gender equality, the end of imperialism, and the younger generation taking center stage. When the Cold War was at its peak, the massive student movement mainly bypassed institutionalized politics of the Old Left to undertake a radical transformation of both capitalism and real socialism. In a world divided into two blocs, students from Mexico through North America and Europe to Japan demonstrated on streets or occupied universities, countering the imperialism of the superpowers (the US war against Vietnam and the Soviet Union invasion of Czechoslovakia) and the systemic violence that prevented them from taking their precarious condition in their own hands.<sup>2</sup>

Students in the capitalist West (the US, France, Britain, Germany, and Italy) protested against the mandarism of the university and its curricular ossification. They fiercely resisted the police violence and the authoritarian reflexes of the established power. Furthermore, they defied racism, patriarchy, and homophobia. Especially in France and Italy, students allied with industrial workers to oppose capitalist exploitation and social inequality. In the pursuit of the emancipatory idea of freedom, the young experimented with anti-bourgeois sociality, sexuality, and counter-culture, while deriding contemporaneous middle-class consumerism and the academicism of high culture.

Since the mid-1950s, their coevals in the Eastern bloc (in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia) also protested against the university institution, which they felt was lagging behind the accelerated modernization. However, many aims of Eastern students differed from those of their Western mates. They fought against a modest living standard in the state-controlled economy, against the monopoly of the Communist *nomenklatura*, censorship and

the suppression of individual liberties, and the Soviet hegemony over their nation-states. In several cases, industrial workers supported student demonstrations by going on strike or forming independent workers' councils, whereas, on the other hand, the Communist authorities used the proletariat in their anti-intellectual campaigns to stifle the student revolt or silence the so-called critical intellectuals. Current interpretations of the student movements in the East tend to overestimate the role of students and intellectuals in mass protests such as the Prague Spring, highlight their pro-Western liberal-capitalist agenda, but downplay their democratic-socialist orientation and neglect nationalist and populist proclivities. It is these contradictions that will determine the world in the period of neoliberal hegemony from the 1980s to the present.

The world student revolt also resonated in the non-aligned Yugoslavia, including the Socialist Republic of Slovenia.<sup>3</sup> Given that after the 1948 split with Stalin and the Soviet bloc, Yugoslavia not only figured as a buffer state between the East and West but also as the founding member of the world-wide Non-Aligned Movement, criticism of the US and USSR imperialism voiced by the students was in line with the official position of Yugoslav authorities. In a similar vein, students' protests against bureaucracy and insufficient participation of workers and the youth in the system of the socialist self-management could appeal to the official ideology presenting the Yugoslav economic-political system as an alternative to both the liberal-capitalist West and the real-socialist East.

Students in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb joined the transnational student movement, following it with commitment in their independent media. They emulated the global revolt's political forms such as demonstrations, sit-ins, graffiti, teach-ins, faculty occupations, and independent self-organization. They, too, protested against imperialism and racism, scorned consumerism, required the reform of the university, and improvement of the social condition of the underprivileged students. In their struggle for social equality, Yugoslav students attempted to ally with workers just like their French comrades. Nevertheless, in their demands for social justice, political autonomy, and participation in the decision-making, the perspective of Slovenian and Yugoslav students was specific in that it mostly relied on the ruling ideology and took it seriously. Their radicalism amounted to calls for a return to the origins of the socialist revolution.

## Modernism and the proximity to revolution

According to Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson, the modernism of the first decades of the twentieth century is characterized by the resistance to academicism and to the commodification of culture; Anderson also foregrounds the imaginative proximity of revolution as modernism's defining feature.<sup>4</sup> After the Second World War, the defying potential of early modernism has been commodified and canonized (in core modernisms of the West) or lost in belated repetition (in peripheral modernisms in the rest of the world), according to Anderson. Granted, the Eurocentric view that the primary measure of modernity resides in Western metropolises has recently been countered by the conception of plural modernisms. However, according to Jameson's critique of the idea of multiple modernities, the essence of modernism is to be found neither in the Western metropolises nor in the global periphery, but instead in the asymmetrical structure of relations between particular modernisms within the modern world-system.<sup>5</sup>

Anderson characterized modernism as "as a cultural field of force" that opposes both the aesthetic academicism and the contemporary cultural market while experiencing the "imaginative proximity of social revolution."<sup>6</sup> Following Anderson and paraphrasing Franco Moretti's description of early modernism as "the last creative drive of European literature,"<sup>7</sup> experimental literature produced in the socio-political conjuncture of the global '68 revolt may be termed the last season of modernism. The anti-systemic student movement – the last world-revolution in the opinion of Immanuel Wallerstein<sup>8</sup> – succeeded in renewing modernism because it sensed the proximity of a revolutionary transformation.

In these years, modernism took conceptually, theoretically, and politically radical forms in neo-avant-gardes. As early as 1958, Guy Debord, the intellectual founder of the Situationist International, proclaimed his "Theses for the cultural revolution." In contrast to the aim of the nineteenth-century aesthetic tradition to reproduce bygone fragments of life, Debord describes Situationist art as "an experimental method for constructing everyday life," which revolutionizes the capitalist regimentation of labor and leisure.<sup>9</sup> As Patrick Combes points out, the recurring topic of "literature and revolution" appears prominently in the 1968 paper of Philippe Sollers, a prominent novelist, Leninist structuralist, and the editor of the *Tel Quel* journal. Sollers criticizes the established notions of literature, author, and work of art as symptoms of decadent bourgeois ideology. He proclaims that "writing" as practiced in *Tel Quel* and revolution have the same objectives.<sup>10</sup> In the summer issue of 1968, *Tel Quel* printed seven theses on "The Revolution Here and Now," which begin with the statement: "The

action which is carried by us and through us is currently textual.”<sup>11</sup>To Sollers and his Leninist comrades, who wanted to strengthen the leading neo-avant-garde status of *Tel Quel* vis-à-vis both the still influential surrealist avant-garde and the emerging progressivist *groupuscules*, French students were even not a genuine revolutionary subject that could replace the proletariat.<sup>12</sup> *Tel Quelians* declare that theoretical and political pronouncements of the student movement “give a revolutionary appearance to that what is merely a petty-bourgeois and leftist (*gauchiste*) ideological infiltration.”<sup>13</sup> In his sociology of the French literary avant-garde of the 1960s, Boris Gobille contends that the student and working-class uprising caused a political crisis in which modernist writers and intellectuals of different generations and orientations (from surrealists and leftist existentialists to materialist structuralists) embraced a belief that literature or writing had the capacity of transforming not only the literary establishment but also capitalist society at large.<sup>14</sup> Concomitantly, the political turmoil instigated writers who supported the movement to rethink the role of literature and their profession in view of revolution.

Neo-avant-garde experimental literature<sup>15</sup> explored the literary, including its limits, medium, and context, while theory, which emerged from post-phenomenological and Marxist philosophy, crossbred with structuralist linguistics and psychoanalysis to modernize the apparatus of the critical reason that supplants philosophy and deconstructs ideology.<sup>16</sup> Thus, literary and theoretical neo-avant-garde of the 1960s broke with the bourgeois and socialist version of the institution of art. In this way, literature and theory, whose discourses often implied the idea of revolutionizing the world through the text, showed how to transfer transformative impulse from writing to political action, from concepts into everyday life.

### **Peripheral modernism in the process of global transformation**

Moretti claims that peripheries in the literary world-system are typically compelled into a belated compromise between local topics or perspectives and globalized forms emanating from metropolitan origins of modernity.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Slovenian literary culture of the long '68, however, it was precisely what Steven Tötösy calls “in-between peripherality”<sup>18</sup> (i.e., the place of Yugoslav inter-literary community between the two Cold War blocks) that produced innovative political interlacements of theory with literature. At that time, Slovenia and Yugoslavia, whose literary development the Warwick Research Collective

might qualify as “combined and uneven,”<sup>19</sup> synchronized with Paris, dubbed “the Greenwich meridian of modernity” by Pascale Casanova’s famous book on world literature.<sup>20</sup>

In Slovenia, the period of so-called liberal reforms (partly coinciding with Dubček’s Prague Spring) represented a historical conjecture in which modernization of the capitalist West hybridized with modernization of the socialist East. In this conjecture, Anderson’s imaginative proximity to the social revolution revolutionized modernism itself. Embedded in the world-wide insurgency of students and workers, Slovenian modernism of the 1960s synchronized with Western centers of modernity agitated by the same global event. It brought together critical theory and experimental artistic practice with the hope of being able to reshape writing, literary institution, the subject, and society at large. Inspired by radical modernist theories and art practices emanating from western metropolises, innovative neo-avant-garde currents surfaced among the Slovenian sixty-eighters as outcomes of syncretism typical of the accelerated and irregular literary development. Metropolitan forms were thus adopted through perspectives and issues marked by Slovenian and Yugoslav in-between peripherality.

Among neo-avant-garde forms such as concrete and visual poetry, experimental theater, nouveau roman, or political metafiction, intermedial practices of the Ljubljana group OHO (1966–1971) were most noticeable. In their work, conceptuality informed performance, ready-mades, concrete and reist poetry, drawings, comics, land-art, and experimentation with the ways of living. With their theoretical reflection, which decentered subjectivity and human agency, foregrounding and cataloging the world of things, beings, and nature instead, the OHO artists found resonance in other parts of Yugoslavia to be consecrated by the global metropole, the MoMa in New York.<sup>21</sup> Interdiscursive linkage to the French structuralist theory of the 1960s – in particular, Roland Barthes’s notion of the text and Jacques Derrida’s idea of the free play of signifiers – fashioned two Slovenian modernist currents. They are called ludism and linguism.

Ludism, whose initiator was the poet Tomaž Šalamun, denotes transgressive play with all kinds of repertoires of the (national) literary institution. Beginning in the sixties and extending well into the postmodernism of the eighties, linguism, too, drew on the metropolitan theory of text and writing advocated by Barthes, Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers. As a phenomenon of the socialist in-between periphery, Slovenian linguism transposed up-to-date concepts into a poetic idiom that relied on models of the symbolist *poésie pure* and Hugo Friedrich’s interpretation of modern poetry in terms of dehumanization. Just like French theory, which at the time was going global, Slovenian linguism regarded the

text as open, inconclusive, and intertextual structure whose meaning disseminates across the chain of signifiers. In contradistinction to ludism, which used carnivalization to parody the post-romantic tradition and subvert dominant ideology of the present, linguism resigned from any political reference. Its self-reflective gaze instead focused on the scene of writing, attempting to reach the presumed essence of the lyrical genre. Linguism's toning down the adversary affects represented a symptom of what may be termed – following Roberto Esposito<sup>22</sup> – the “immunization of modernism.” Ever since the mid-1970s, the immunization reflected socio-political changes in the wake of the apparently failed revolutionary utopia of the long '68. It resulted from the trauma of intellectuals and writers affected by the “leaden seventies,” when Tito's regime cunningly pacified the student movement by making concessions to the young while suppressing liberal and nationalist trends in individual Yugoslav republics. What followed in the 1980s, was a lethal debt crisis of Yugoslavia and its nationalist disintegration. The Yugoslav crisis reflected the preponderance of global capitalism, the historically most flexible economic system, over the unavoidable limits of its Second-World alternative.

In the revolutionary 1960s, not only literature claimed avant-garde status. The structuralist theory showed the same ambition. *Tel Quel* has already been mentioned in this respect. Being *au courant* with contemporary French theory as practiced by *Tel Quel*, Derrida, Barthes, Althusser, and Lacan, theorists of the Slovenian brand of structuralism were initially still reminiscent of the onetime alliance of Russian Formalists with futurist artists in the atmosphere of the October Revolution. The revolutionary transformation of society was a joint project of political, literary, and theoretical avant-gardes, along with the media they shared, for example, the journals *Tribuna* and *Problemi*. By 1975 however, Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik, Braco Rotar, and other materialist semioticians cut with literature to present their critique as the only genuine avant-garde. They understood their theory as a privileged agency entitled to pursue the critique of the literary institution *and* its neo-avant-garde alternative.

The Ljubljana Lacanian circle, whose dismissal of revolutionary “romanticism” of Slovenian modernist and neo-avant-garde literature reminds of *Tel Quel*'s Leninism mentioned above, produced another peripheral innovation at the global level. Nikola Dedić draws attention to a twofold specificity of Slovenian Lacanians. On the one hand, they differed from their Second-World colleagues in that they could easily familiarize themselves with French theory since Yugoslav authorities showed a fairly open-minded attitude towards non-official Marxism, even the variety revising Marxism from what Second-World

Communists would condemn as a “formalist” perspective. On the other hand, the Ljubljana poststructuralists were arguably the first – even compared to the First-World metropolises – to systematically apply Lacanian psychoanalysis to the fields of cultural and social critique.<sup>23</sup> With its specific syncretism, the theory group around *Problemi – Razprave* fashioned a peripheral compromise that was soon to become a central reference in today’s globalized theory.

### **Epilog: Inversions and continuities**

To my knowledge, two opposing narratives interpret the process spanning from 1968 to 1989. The first one builds on inversions, whereas the second one – less influential – detects continuities. The advocates of the present-day neoliberal order typically speak about the end of progressive or revolutionary master-narratives, which they consider inherently flawed.<sup>24</sup> Such narratives go so far as to announce the end of history at the moment when the western-type liberal democracy and free trade, having smashed the economically inefficient and socially inert Eastern totalitarianism, started to rule the planet. Their adversaries on the left, in turn, regret that the emancipatory transformative potential of the long ’68 has been pacified and systematically forgotten by the neo-liberal world order.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, the year 1989 appears to be the mirror picture of 1968. Not only year numbers mirror each other. Events, processes, and ideologies likewise produce a series of upside-downs. The iconic barricade building in Paris has been replaced by the emblematic fall of the Berlin Wall. Former radical ideologues have converted into mediatized new philosophers, while yippies have morphed into yuppies. Former anti-establishment fighters have been recruited to national or transnational political elites. Instead of progressive internationalism, we witness retrograde nationalism and populism, whereas anti-capitalism has made room for pro-capitalism. In the place of national and international politics, we enjoy the spectacle of the political class that has degraded into boorish entertainers in the hands of transnational capital.

All in all, the historical conjuncture of ’68, whose struggle to transform the world seemed to have failed, led to that of ’89, which did transform the world by announcing the end of the utopia that had inspired the revolt only two decades before. Postmodern neoliberalism, oddly pretending that it has satisfied students’ demands of individual liberties, declared victory over Communist totalitarianism, fostered economic growth through flexible modes of globalized production, and spread the human rights discourse across the planet. This

world order seems to have stamped out any utopian alternative that could draw inspiration from the memory of May '68.

Nevertheless, Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein have shown that it is equally plausible to understand 1989 as a continuation of 1968, the “rehearsal” of the world revolution.<sup>26</sup> They detect the continuation of the unfinished project started in the 1960s by anti-systemic forces beyond the institutional Old Left of the First and Second World. Grassroots movements of the post-industrial working class and new intelligentsia that “rehearsed” their challenging of the world-system’s asymmetries in the 1960s carry on their fight before and after 1989, adapting it to a significant historical change: the decline of the Soviet-type socialism and the diminished power of nation-states.

To conclude, it may be that after modernism and student-labor insurgency had faded, postmodernism in aesthetics and neo-conservatism in politics conquered the core of the world-system. Similarly, in Slovenia and other Yugoslav republics, the last season of modernism was followed by the crisis of socialist self-management, the bloody disintegration of the federation, and the emergence of independent successor states, which the world-system coopted one after another. However, the so-called civil society of the 1980s, with its ecological, feminist, LGBT, anti-racist, and other movements would not be possible without the '68 rehearsal. Neither could we witness massive global movements of the new millennium that struggled against globalization, such as Occupy Wall Street. In the field of cultural production, post-avant-gardes such as Neue slowenische Kunst were a direct response to the conceptual and political radicalism of their neo-avant-garde predecessors such as OHO. And, finally, there can be no doubt that critical theory that the Lacanian *troika* from Ljubljana applies to global political issues came out from a peripheral intellectual laboratory of the 1960s.

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Vinen (2018) *The Long '68: Radical Protest and Its Enemies* ([London] [etc.]: Allen Lane).

<sup>2</sup> Mohandesi et al. (2018) *What Was 1968? Voices of 1968: Documents from the Global North* (London: Pluto Press) pp. 1–34.

<sup>3</sup> H. Klasić (2012) *Jugoslavija i svijet 1968* (Zagreb: Ljevak).

<sup>4</sup> F. Jameson (2002) *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso) pp. 171–180. P. Anderson (1984) *Modernity and Revolution*. *New Left Review* 1.144: 96–113, pp. 104–105.

<sup>5</sup> Jameson (2002).

<sup>6</sup> P. Anderson (1984) pp. 104–105.

<sup>7</sup> F. Moretti (2013) *Distant Reading* (London: Verso) p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> I. Wallerstein (2014) *Antisystemic Movements, Yesterday and Today*. *Journal of World-Systems Research* 20.2: 158–172, p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> G. Debord (1958). *Thèses sur la révolution culturelle*. *Internationale situationniste* 1: 20–21.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in: P. Combes (2008) *Mai 68, les écrivains, la littérature* (Paris: L’Harmattan) p. 7, 31–32.

<sup>11</sup> J.-L. Baudry et al. (1968) *La Révolution ici maintenant*. *Tel Quel* 34: 3–4.



- 
- <sup>12</sup> B. Gobbille (2018) *Le Mai 68 des écrivains: Crise politique et avan-gardes littéraires* (Paris: CNRS éditions) pp. 115–181.
- <sup>13</sup> Tel Quel (1968) Mai 1968. *Tel Quel* 34 : 94–95.
- <sup>14</sup> Gobbille (2018).
- <sup>15</sup> J. Bray et al., eds. (2015) *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London; New York: Routledge)
- <sup>16</sup> J.-M. Rabaté (2002) *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell) pp. 24–91.
- <sup>17</sup> F. Moretti (2013) *Distant Reading* (London: Verso) p. 116.
- <sup>18</sup> For the concept of in-between peripherality, see: S. Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999) Configurations of Postcoloniality and National Identity: In-between Peripherality and Narratives of Change. *The Comparatist: Journal of the Southern Comparative Literature Association* 23: 89–110.
- <sup>19</sup> S. Deckard, et al. (2015) *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press).
- <sup>20</sup> P. Casanova (1999) *La République mondiale des Lettres* (Paris: Seuil).
- <sup>21</sup> See K. L. McShine, ed. (1970) *Information: Summer 1970* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art).
- <sup>22</sup> R. Esposito (2008) *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Trans. Timothy Cambell (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P) pp. 45–77.
- <sup>23</sup> N. Dedić (2016) On Yugoslav Poststructuralism: Introduction to ‘Art, Society/Text’ (1975). *ARTMargins* 5.3: 93–101.
- <sup>24</sup> See, e. g., V. Tismăneanu (2011). *Promises of 1968: Crisis, illusion, and utopia* (Budapest: Central European University Press).
- <sup>25</sup> See, e. g., K. Ross (2002) *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: U of Chicago P).
- <sup>26</sup> G. Arrighi et al. (1992). 1989, the Continuation of 1968. *Review* 15.2: 221–242.