

## WORLDING HUNGARIAN SURREALISM. A SHORT HISTORY

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**Abstract** The present article offers a structured account of Hungarian artistic careers in the context of Surrealism – and a possible narrative of the history of Hungarian Surrealism. While occasionally, individual Hungarian authors affiliated with extraterritorial surrealist groups, were included into international overviews of Surrealism, the story of Hungarian Surrealism as an institutional venture and as a network of artistic activities is yet to be written. The article identifies three important benchmarks that shaped the history of Hungarian Surrealism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords** Avant-garde, exile, Hungary, Surrealism, world literature studies.

Hungarian surrealist artists connected different languages and cultures, branches of art and scientific disciplines. My article outlines the theoretical and fictional works, groups, movements and experiments related to Hungarian Surrealism, based on my recent monograph about *The History of Surrealism in the Hungarian Literary Field*.<sup>1</sup>

First, I will address the question of the visibility of Hungarian surrealists in the contexts of national culture and world culture; secondly, I will discuss the three main benchmarks in the history of Hungarian Surrealism; thirdly, I will briefly mention the activity of eight authors connected to the avant-garde movement, with a special focus on the post-second world war period. Based on these examples, my conclusions will bring forth the necessity for a revision of the way in which literary studies and art history approached these authors and Surrealism itself.

But first, we should quite frankly address the question of whether a Hungarian Surrealism exists or not. Affirmative answers can be supported by efforts like a major 2019 exhibition from Szentendre entitled *Hungarian Surrealism*, highlighting works by 48 visual

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<sup>1</sup> Balázs Imre József, *A szürrealizmus története a magyar irodalmi mezőben* (Budapest: Ráció, 2021).

artists from the classical periods of Surrealism.<sup>2</sup> Literary scholars such as Imre Bori also investigated the question in a comprehensive way, in an entire volume published solely on this matter in 1970, namely *The Age of Surrealism*.<sup>3</sup> On the negative side, we can identify works like *The International Encyclopedia of Surrealism* published by Bloomsbury,<sup>4</sup> which has no overview on the Hungarian Surrealism, and the Hungarian authors included are actually all exile artists.

The absence of Hungary from the national overviews of the Encyclopedia can be explained by the fact that (besides some aborted post-war projects) no admittedly surrealist group materialized in Hungary or among exiled Hungarians. Artists like Simon Hantai, Judit Reigl, Kati Horna, were all directly connected to the surrealist groups in Paris or Mexico. These major post-war Hungarian artists were, of course, an adequate choice for representing the field of visual arts in such a volume even though the Hungarian group activities and journals themselves were omitted.

On the literary scene, earlier episodes could also be taken into account. Poets like Gyula Illyés, Tibor Déry, Andor Németh, who were active during the 1920s as avant-garde authors, were featured in certain international overviews published in the past, like the ones compiled by the Paris-based scholarly magazine *Mélusine*.<sup>5</sup> Other lesser-known figures like Arpad Mezei, Charles Sirato, Imre Pan, Tibor Tardos were part of the second phase of surrealist history as the contact persons for international Surrealism. What needs to be pointed out in these cases was that they were all multilingual authors, a fact that may have caused less visibility of their surrealist works in literary histories not only on the international field, but also in local histories informed by the so-called methodological nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Having considered these factors, my thesis that I developed in my history of Hungarian Surrealism, was that this narrative had to be reconstructed using a transnational approach, archival material, political contextualization, and collecting direct references to the movement in the Hungarian art field, so as to avoid false generalizations.

A general overview of the Hungarian avant-garde is necessary in order to explain its relatively obscure presence in the wider field of avant-garde studies. Major figures like the visual artist and theoretician László Moholy-Nagy, or the photographer Brassai activated mostly disconnected from the Hungarian art scene. Even Lajos Kassák created arguably his best-known works during his exile in Vienna, between 1920 and 1926. The nature of the Hungarian avant-garde shaped by these authors seems to be predominantly an avant-garde

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<sup>2</sup> *Hungarian Surrealism*. 2019. 05. 25 – 09. 01. Ferenczy Museum, Szentendre. Chief curator: Gábor Gulyás, curator: Dalma Eged.

<sup>3</sup> Bori Imre, *A szürrealizmus ideje: A magyar szürrealizmus irodalma* (Újvidék: Forum, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Richardson, gen. ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Surrealism* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), I–III.

<sup>5</sup> "Ombre portée: Le surréalisme en Hongrie," *Mélusine* 15 (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian, *Introduction: The Worlds of Romanian Literature and the Geopolitics of Reading*, in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. Christian Moraru, Mircea Martin and Andrei Terian (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 6-13.

directed towards abstraction, and mostly discussed in the contexts of constructivism, DADA, and, in the early stages, in connection to Expressionism and activism as well.

If we focus on the Hungarian art field itself, we may identify some key moments that shaped the presence of the avant-garde: the late programmatic affirmation of high modernism through the review *Nyugat* in 1908, and an avant-garde follow-up launched by Lajos Kassák just seven years later, in 1915, when modernist positions were still very shaky in a generally conservative art field. This led to a conflictual relationship between modernist and avant-garde authors in Hungarian literature, and as a canonical battle, it was won on the long run by the modernists of *Nyugat*. The fate of the Hungarian avant-garde was also shaped by the exiled status of many of its authors – an exile resulting from their left-wing political positions in a conservative interwar Hungary, and an exile that ended for most of these artists in 1926, after a slight change and compromise in the political direction of the country. By 1930, Hungarian literary scholars tend to identify a first dispersion and dying out of the avant-garde, justified by the disappearance of avant-garde little magazines and group activities in that period. Between 1945 and 1948, a new, flourishing episode can be identified, although this period was overlooked on many occasions in previous narratives. Theoretizations of the neo-avant-garde appear beginning with the 1960s, in many cases these being again extraterritorial – Yugoslavia, France, United States, Canada etc.

Thus, how can we establish the position occupied by the Hungarian Surrealism, in relation with both the histories of the Hungarian avant-garde, and the processes of ‘worlding’ Surrealism studies? In my monograph, I identified 3 major benchmarks for the history of Hungarian Surrealism.

1. The journal *Dokumentum* (1926-1927), edited by Lajos Kassák, Gyula Illyés, Tibor Déry, Andor Németh, József Nádass;
2. The group Európai Iskola / European School (1945-1948), having as leading theoreticians members like Árpád Mezei, Imre Pán, Pál Gegesi Kiss, with the honorary membership of Marcel Jean that I will discuss later;
3. The journal *Arkánum* (1981-1996), with the presence of József Bakucz, poet and theoretician, translator of André Breton (journal edited by Bakucz, Sándor András, László Kemenes Géfin, György Vitéz).

A complete in-depth presentation of Hungarian artists connected to Surrealism would obviously surpass the space limitations of the present article. However, in the following paragraphs, I will briefly highlight the activity of eight authors, placing them within the structure that I have outlined above, following the three main benchmarks.

The first two are connected to the *Dokumentum* episode, 1926-1927. Both authors experimented with writing in multiple languages, in Hungarian and German, and in Hungarian and French, respectively.

Tibor Déry (1894-1977) started his career as a follower of the aestheticist modernism of *Nyugat*, having come into contact with the avant-garde during his exile between 1919 and

1926, in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and Italy. His surrealist theoretical works and texts are connected to dreamscapes, imaginary worlds and collage techniques developed mostly in the period of the review *Dokumentum* in Budapest after his return to Hungary.

Another major figure of this period is Gyula Illyés (1902-1983), who lived in Paris between 1922-1926 and met different members of the Dadaist-Surrealist movement, including André Breton, Louis Aragon and Tristan Tzara. In this period, he sent review articles and translations to Hungarian avant-garde journals from Vienna, Budapest and Arad. After returning to Budapest, in 1926, he experimented with the technique of automatic writing and published such texts in *Dokumentum*. He also wrote a parody review of the Budapest telephone directory for *Dokumentum* – a rare example of surrealist farce in the Hungarian language. After *Dokumentum* ceased to be published, he approached the “népi”, the populist movement and *Nyugat*'s modernist literature. He kept on promoting Aragon's works after his avant-garde period, and remained in contact with Tzara even in the post-war decades.

The question arises: what happened to Surrealism during the 1930s within the Hungarian artistic field? I argue that its discrete presence could be felt mostly within the performative arts, and again in the case of some exile authors. Charles Sirato (1905-1980) is an example of an exile author, living in Paris between 1930 and 1936. During this period, he produced some texts with a technique of free associations, indebted to the poetics of André Breton's *Union libre*, but is internationally better known for his *Dimensionist manifesto* (1936),<sup>7</sup> placing surrealist objects in a larger theoretical framework. Artists formerly associated with the surrealist movement, like Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Camille Bryen, Joan Miró etc, signed his manifesto. Sirató's example highlights the importance of identifying network structures within the avant-garde, between cultures and artistic currents.

My next example, Marcel Jean (1900-1993) also illustrates such claims, but in the opposite direction. As a member of the Paris surrealist group since 1933, a painter and poet present in the most important publications and exhibitions of the surrealists, Jean lived in Budapest between 1938-1945, working as a textile designer. In a sense, he activated as a French exile author in Hungary, for seven years. His collaborations with Árpád Mezei, a theoretician he met in Budapest, led to publications about *Maldoror* and to the first comprehensive history of surrealist painting,<sup>8</sup> imagined as a pair of Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du surréalisme*.<sup>9</sup> He designed several important surrealist objects in Hungary, featured in recent international exhibitions,<sup>10</sup> and published a collection of essays and poems in Budapest, entitled *Mnésiques* (1942).<sup>11</sup> In my view, he had a decisive impact on the Hungarian art field, shaping the interest of the European School of the post-war years in the direction of Surrealism.

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<sup>7</sup> *Dimensionism: Modern Art in the Age of Einstein*, ed. Vanja V. Malloy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Jean avec la collaboration de Mezei Arpad, *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste* (Paris: Seuil, 1959).

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1945).

<sup>10</sup> *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, curators: Stephanie d'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, Tate Modern, London, 24 February – 29 August 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Jean, *Mnésiques: Essai avec trois dessins de l'auteur* (Budapest: Hungária, 1942).

The European School (1945-1948) was an association of painters, art theorists and writers who played an important role in the promotion and dissemination of post-WWII avant-garde art with abstract and surrealist tendencies (by organising exhibitions, lectures, publications – publishing European School Library and *Index*).<sup>12</sup> They initiated international relations with French, Czech, Romanian, Belgian artists and theorists (which led to the exchange of publications, the organisation of exhibitions in Budapest, the promotion of Hungarian art abroad). The founding document of the European School was signed on 13 October 1945 by Imre Pán, Árpád Mezei, Pál Gegesi Kiss, Lajos Kassák, Ernő Kállai, and later on by other artists who joined the group. One of their major connections to the surrealist circles was their participation in the *Surrealism in 1947* exhibition in Paris (Béla Bán, Endre Bálint as painters, Árpád Mezei as an author of the exhibition catalogue). The group's dissolution occurred in 1948, with the sovietization of Hungarian and other East Central European cultures.

Two major figures of the European School were theoreticians Árpád Mezei (1902-1998) and Imre Pán (1904-1972). They were both involved in international networking activities. I will not insist here on presenting their activity in too much detail – I will just note that their work is outstanding in its transnational character and networked structure. They both lived as exile authors after 1956 and 1975, respectively, activating as multilingual authors.

Another episode of Hungarian Surrealism can be connected to the group of revolutionary surrealists, 1947-1948 (*surréalisme-révolutionnaire*), which included members of Belgian, French, Dutch, Danish, Czech and Hungarian descent. The founders of this dissident surrealist group, characterized by political engagement and communist connections, were Christian Dotremont, Noel Arnaud, René Passeron, Édouard Jaguer, and, in many ways, it was a prelude to the CoBrA network.<sup>13</sup> The Hungarian connection of the group was Tibor Tardos (1918-2004), a writer, translator and journalist who lived in France between 1938-1947 and 1963-2004. He was the author of several French volumes of prose and poetry while living in France and he took part in the French resistance. He then returned to Hungary as an ardent Communist – however, he was politically convicted after the 1956 Hungarian revolution (to 1,5 years in prison). In 1963, he returned to France. Tardos' work exemplifies another type of multilingual, networking activity, largely invisible from the framework of the methodological nationalism, but one that is quite interesting given its hybrid and collaborative character.

Within the international Surrealism studies, the contemporary Surrealism of the '60s, '70s, '80s received an increasing amount of attention. In this sense, my final example, the U.S.-based group *Arkánium* (Sándor András, József Bakucz, György Vitéz, László Kemenes Géfin) is quite relevant. The group member most connected to Surrealism, József Bakucz (1929-1990), published several volumes of Hungarian poetry, but he also wrote unpublished volumes in French and English and translated works by André Breton and Sarane Alexandrian.

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<sup>12</sup> György Péter and Pataki, Gábor, "The European School and the Group of Abstract Artists," in *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism 1918–1956*, eds. Beáta Hock, Klara Kemp-Welch and Jonathan Owen (London: The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Édouard Jaguer, *Cobra au coeur du xxe siècle* (Paris: Galilée, 1997).

Bakucz promoted *Arkánium* as a surrealist project, which was true in the sense that it published many translations from surrealist poets, essays by second-generation surrealist Árpád Mezei, and theoretical texts relevant for the field of Surrealism. József Bakucz's version of third-generation Surrealism was strongly connected to the Surrealism of *Arcane 17*, and initiated a fusion between cognitive theory, science and surrealist explorations of the imaginary and the human psyche.

I strongly believe that the structure outlined above as a narrative about the history of Hungarian Surrealism, with its 3 key moments: 1926-1927, 1945-1948, 1981-1990 can be well integrated into the current, expanding planetarization of Surrealism studies.<sup>14</sup> The conclusions of my investigations are as follows:

1. The exile situation contributed to the marginality of Hungarian surrealists in national historical narratives; many exile authors developed specific linguistic strategies to address their position;
2. Their activity as agents involved in cultural transfers can now, with the use of newly available archival material, be reconstructed and contextualized in a globalized narrative of cultural networks;
3. Figures like Simon Hantai, Judit Reigl, Kati Horna, Endre Rozsda also shaped Hungarian Surrealism as exile artists – their contributions, discussed in detail by international scholars, can be integrated into the narratives about Hungarian Surrealism considering their transnational and networked aspects.

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<sup>14</sup> Delia Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).