

Eötvös Loránd University
Doctoral School of Philosophy
Film, Media and Contemporary Culture Program

Emese Kürti

EXPERIMENTALISM, AVANT-GARDE AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE 1960S:
DR LÁSZLÓ VÉGH AND HIS CIRCLE

SUPERVISOR:
DR. PÉTER GYÖRGY, DSc

Members of the Committee:

Dr. Sándor Radnóti, DSc, chair;
Dr. József Havasréti PhD and Dr. Zsolt K. Horváth PhD, opponents;
Dr. Tamás Seregi PhD, Dr. Ádám Ignác PhD, Dr. Anna Gács PhD

THESES OF DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

Budapest, 2015

The objectives and the past trajectory of research

According to customary academic narratives, there has been no such radical turning point between 1956 and 1965 as the first ‘happening’ in Hungary appeared to be, realised in 1966. That period was supposed to be characterised by the dominance of classical artistic media, the organic modernist continuity of attitudes and artistic norms as well as the personal strategies of adaptation to the new canon of official art. Nevertheless, it would appear that the paradigm shift has taken place towards the end of the 1950s, at least in part, that it has closed an epoch and it has opened the way for the more open artistic thought, more interested in the contemporary international practices of the age. In 1958 in Hungary the first experimental pieces of music made their first appearance, concomitant with such tendencies abroad, together with signs of such experimenting trickling down to literature and the visual arts, a clear change compared to the monomedial view of the 1950s. Parallel to this process and as a result of the polarisation of the life of the arts, the social and cultural structures of art had been transformed, too: the ever more intense activities of the social networks in question had not only prepared the reception of *avant-garde* art, but also, by the dissemination of pre-*avant-garde* attitudes and of experimental works, they would draw the boundaries of a hitherto unsuspected, more characteristic period of our art history.

At the centre of these events, we find the curious figure of Dr László Végh (born at Budapest, in 1931), composer and physician who, as a one-man institution, had become the mediator of modernism and *avant-garde*, in the underground *milieux* that rejected the canons of ‘socialist realism’ and where, in keeping with the logic of the cold war, the most valuable commodity was information concerning contemporary ‘Western’ culture. In his person was reunited the inspiring rôle of an access to knowledge and of a ‘systemic’ critical attitude, and these two components had offered an alternative, unimaginable today, for intellectuals of the period, especially the young. His popular and indispensable character gave him such a status (or power) which was only in part similar to that of the great male personalities of the Hungarian *avant-garde* (such as Lajos Kassák and Miklós Erdély) as Dr Végh did not spread his own works, but popularised those of others with professional methods of data processing. His position, one of the most influential ones in the Hungarian underground was not due to his *œuvre*, but to his non-conformist personality, interdisciplinary culture and to his alternative ‘pedagogy’. Apart from his cultural rôle, to this has contributed his past as an agent of the secret services that assures him of a rather ambivalent part in today’s recollections.

I looked up László Végh in December 2011 at his flat on József körút (one of Budapest’s main thoroughfares) where he had lived since he was born. A short, greying, ageless man opened the door who did not move like the eighty-two years old that he was, you could perceive a sort of dynamic instability as he ushered me in his apartment, a mythical place since the 1960s, with his blue-grey, all-seeing gaze. His hair, like always, was swept across his skull. His voice is high, clear, strong, words are coming easily. He found his way back to his favourite, *Le Journal* (a poem by Sándor Weöres) as people who met him in the 1960s, would invariably recall. I started to ask him questions, and he replied with the routine of someone who keeps his memories alive, perhaps too much alive. He quickly showed documents, loose-leaf notebooks and he introduced me to the room set aside for an enormous mass of recordings, all catalogued in the most systematic manner.

There was not a long time to have elapsed in order to feel that in fact it was I the one who was the spy, peering at his decades-old secrets.

This uncomfortable change in our respective rôles lasted for quite a while, for Dr Végh has shared with me the documents of his past with great generosity and, although we've been mutually tactful about our respective status, he has decided at one point to donate his archives to me. After my second visit it has become obvious that a representative slice of the sixties was preserved here, ignored by art historians. László Végh has spent the better part of a year with me in the narrow, windowless room I had at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest at the time and interpreted every recording, piece of writing and photo, has tirelessly answered my queries, and while he was giving me all his interpretative knowledge of the sixties, he remained concentrated, suggestive and inspiring throughout.

At the beginning I thought that getting acquainted with Dr Végh and his archive will help me to understand the everyday surroundings of 'actionism', the accompanying phenomena of lifestyle reform, that is, the context of the *avant-garde*. As time passed, though, the rôle of László Végh in the underground culture of Hungary in the early sixties has taken stronger contours, and it was changed into the independent subject-matter of my dissertation. This turn in my research can be said to be fortunate, as the immersion in the spiritual and social medium created by László Végh has offered me an indispensable foundation for understanding the *new avant-garde* of the 1960s and 1970s.

The methodology and the time-frame of the thesis

The end-points in time of the dissertation are fixed by the consensual notion of 'the long sixties' of which I write about its first period, i. e., between 1958 and 1966, with a brief look at the second half of the sixties. The beginning is the birth of László Végh's 'concrete' and electronic musical compositions (thus of the first *avant-garde* musical experiments) and the end is the appearance of the new *avant-garde*, the first Hungarian happening ('The Lunch. In memoriam Batu Khan', 1966). The period between the two dates is typified by the dominance of modernism and the appearance of the first *avant-garde* works, from the social and cultural point of view the (relative) relaxation of political repression which has enabled the revival of a youth sub-culture. From the mid-sixties, the cultural-political situation has seriously changed, information was much more easily to be had, and the importance of individual strategies in cultural distribution was much reduced. László Végh's mediating rôle was gradually diminished, and the paradigm shift from modernism to *avant-garde* (the appearance of Hungarian actionism) was accomplished – this I hold to be the essential phenomenon of the sixties, in contradistinction to authors who did concentrate on the modifying forms of modernism. This approach is pretty far from the traditional art historical view which, in spite of many methodological innovations, remained faithful to the discourse built upon the old mainstream hierarchy of artistic media usual in the Kádár era.

In selecting a methodology for my thesis, I have taken into consideration those contemporary discourses which prefer Piotr Piotrowski's horizontality principle and comparative research in regional and international art history. It would be attractive and interesting to confront the practices of the Hungarian sixties represented by Dr Végh with some of its distant counterparts in the global space or to use a parallel analysis of the functionally analogous, comparable figures in the region. The secret service past and medial analogies of the *avant-garde* artists of the erstwhile Czecho-Slovak scene – Jiří Valoch, Alex Mlynarčík, Milan Adamčíak – could introduce common surfaces for the creation of comparative narratives of this sort.

In the absence of such regional 'stories' the practice of comparatism is cumbersome which, fearing the stigma of provincialism, does a *fiute en avant* and might risk the possibility of error.

To solve this dilemma, I attempted to find a method which would assume the validity of the historical view tied to the relative backwardness of art historical writing, a method which might be assisted by the interaction of neglected microscopic events. One of the classics of microhistory, Carlo Ginzburg, has criticised Foucault precisely because his method results in ‘aestheticising irrationalism’ when concentrating on the mechanism of the repressive apparatuses, while relegating the situation of the oppressed into a distant corner. Microhistory, on the contrary, and instead of Grand Narratives, would focus on minute local events which might make neglected spaces and relations accessible.

On the backdrop of microhistory, I have tried to employ the tools of oral history and of content analysis. I conducted conversations and interviews with friends, old associates and, naturally, with László Végh with whom I did quite a few interviews; first at the start of my research, then during the digitalisation of the archives when we have surveyed chronologically the documentation of that decade, which he has commented upon. He gave me a lot of unpublished authorial texts written after 1989, when he thought possible to unveil events and their actors, both illegal in the 1960s. I have used his memoirs in bringing alive fellow artists, friends, ne’er-do-wells, forgotten non-conformist young people and those dropped from the canon and from public memory. The recollections concerning his becoming a secret agent proved particularly sensitive, and so did the history of the so-called ‘walking group’. Beside the Ministry of the Interior documents, these texts are the main sources of this thesis, and the annexed chronology based on László Végh’s diaries between 1961 and 1970, a unique source of artistic, social and topographic information and for establishing a temporal sequence.

I have used the author’s texts aware of the mix of ‘intertwined elements which are real, dictated by private interest or purely hypothetical all at the same time’¹. László Végh’s personal recollections are no exception.

The workings of memory, the historical distance to occurrences of decades ago and, simply, human psychology will construct a narrative which, intersecting with other narratives, has some relation to ‘reality’. So I should present the text of these personal stories in a parallel structure: keeping an eye on the continuity of the writings and of the authorial perspective, I shall provide footnotes where they touch upon other sources, e. g., archives material or other secondary sources. The contradictions and incongruities will be shown where they occur between László Végh’s account, secret police informations and other scholarly sources. All this in the hope that from them it might emerge a certain narrative of the sixties cultural context from the mutual reflexions between several textual types.

The structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of four chapters. The structure is determined by the fundamental trait of László Végh’s activities: interdisciplinarity. Accordingly, the first chapter attempts a critical reading of the secret police agent story, the background being the context of the activity of the Rákosi-era (1949 – 1956) secret police *apparat* and, generally, of the politics of the 1940s and 1950s. I shall describe the prospects and the vague political resistance of young men of bourgeois origin, deemed to be the part of a cultural and ideological ‘opposition’, suppressed by the ÁVH (The Office of Protection of the State) even before they could have started any kind of political action. László Végh ended up in the net of the secret police as a member of just such a group, and his abilities, status and large acquaintance qualified him for an ideal collaborator, and the young student of medicine, blackmailed with the threat of prison, has signed the pledge. There survive his reports from the time of the 1956 revolution; he was re-

¹ Mária Ormos, ‘A történettudomány forrásairól a XX. században’, in: *Hatalom és társadalom a XX. századi magyar történelemben*, Budapest: Osiris, 1995, p. 30.

activated in 1957, and he was, again, an informer for the secret service, reorganised after the revolution, until 1962 when he was ‘expelled’. The documents and Dr Végh’s own recollections attest the fact that the young man, branded and excommunicated as a ‘class alien’ at the medical school, felt that his secret assignment conferred upon him a modicum of revenge and power. For example, he used his ‘reports’ to unmask corrupt residents (his medical elders and betters) who took bribes. So the whole thing has not caused in him any kind of moral conflict, until he was forced to inform on his friends in the ‘Muskátli’ circle (named after a popular café) where he considers even today that what he did was a sort of cultural mission, and he never talked about this, only after he was publicly shown, after 1989, to have been a former secret police informer.

Chapter two describes the cultural context, the techniques used to acquire information, the topographic network of the intelligentsia withdrawn into the private sphere. After the defeat of the 1956 revolution, in spite of the homogenising influence of ‘socialist realism’, underground communities which have incorporated the traditions of progressive cultural tradition, took shape very fast. The most important problem of this chapter is the dichotomy modernism/*avant-garde* in László Végh’s circle. I am starting here from the widespread opinion of the ‘vanguardists’ that László Végh represented the originary *avant-garde* in the underground *milieu*. I define Dr Végh’s cultural profile on the basis of my interpretation of the products of the literature and of the visual arts, the informally accessed musical sources propagated by him *vis-à-vis* the official modernism vs. the *avant-garde*. Relating all this to the concept of interdisciplinarity, I am trying to illustrate that, while recognising the primacy of literature, there was a natural interpenetration between art genres in this circle. But because the objective of this thesis is defining the genealogy of the new *avant-garde*, I am focusing on artists who have questioned the validity of the official thinking on the arts already in the 1960s. So there is an ‘actionist’ thread through the thesis which would determine a narrative on the origins, albeit fragmentary.

Chapter three is a case study: it is concerned by the youth subculture in the ‘Muskátli gang’ (the Hungarian term is ‘*galéri*’) as defined by the terminology of the secret police. They have, like in the case of the branding of Dr Végh’s ‘walking group’, these people have attracted the attention of the police by their private goings-on (in this case, a noisy party), but they have been, symbolically, the adversaries of the powers-that-be, hooligans and their groups (the ‘*galéri*’ people), heirs to 1956. These young people were able to counterbalance or to preclude the generational and political pressure by their ‘revolution of the everyday’ well in advance of the lifestyle reforms of 1968. Their cultural separateness was defined by their own slang, by atypical lifestyles, by a life without steady work and permanent habitation, by liberal sexual morality, by ‘beat’ (that is, rock) music, by dressing creatively, by contraventions to normative morality such as theft or public obscenity. I am quoting instances to exemplify the cracks which have opened in the culturally conservative and morally puritanical Kádár era, very similar to the West European youth subculture of the same period.

The last chapter describes the birth of the appearance of *avant-garde* music in Hungary, mediated by Dr Végh in the unofficial intellectual circles, years before such music was heard on the wireless or in concert halls. Dr Végh himself has composed ‘concrete’ and electronic music after a brief stint at the Academy of Music in Budapest, since 1958, concomitant to similar West European experiments, but amid quite dissimilar circumstances, in the maid’s chamber of his apartment, with borrowed equipment. He never attained professional critical attention, but people eager to hear new voices, young, but unmusical intellectuals held his works to be decisively important, on an equal footing with the foreign composers popularised by him. Referring back to the modernistic form variations described in chapter two, I present Dr Végh’s chances to overtake musically the traditionalist composers (the thirty-year olds, ‘*a Harmincasok*’) of his own generation.

Results of the theses and further research

Although it is Dr László Végh's work which is at the centre of this thesis and of the events treated therein, his social network essentially covers most of the 'underground' of his age. The details of his personal life history have crisscrossed the trajectory and the artistic practice of the period's main figures, and thus the focus may approach many long-forgotten people, even if some have achieved prominence since, from the sixties scene – which might be interesting, if we take into account their social and artistic influence today. Hence my thesis is not just one of the first attempt in the understanding of the rôle of a private citizen, Dr Végh, within the dynamics of power structures and defense mechanisms on the cultural field, but also the cultural habits, rituals, the lifestyle features of the erstwhile youth subculture, linked to artworks more or less distanced from the vernacular of the official culture of the age.

It should be obvious that the objective of my research is the *aggiornamento*, the adjustment to the contemporary scholarly discourses and publications worldwide, concerning the sixties, compared to which Hungarian art history is left behind even in the region, whereas performance art and versions of actionism (such as the happening and fluxus) have been more and more focused upon in avant-garde research.

My thesis attempts to make apparent the indispensable social and cultural background of this new narrative of the avant-garde which might offer a new avant-garde genealogy, rooted in music, compatible with similar phenomena abroad. I am working at present on a volume, scheduled to appear in 2016, which would sum up the history of actionism in Hungary, based on the results of these investigations.

Related Publications:

1. Generations in Experiment: The Cage Effect in the Early Sixties of Hungary. In: Katalin Székely (ed.): *The Freedom of Sound: John Cage behind the Iron Curtain*. Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2013. 134-151.
2. „Kérdezd meg az IPUT-ot!” A Paralel Kurzus/Tanpálya elmélete és gyakorlata. In: Orbán Katalin, Gács Anna (szerk.): *Emlékkerti kőoroszlán: Írások György Péter 60. születésnapjára*. ELTE Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Budapest, 2014. 207-217.
3. Megkésett újdonságok. Köztes állapotok. (Jeney Zoltán, Sáry László, Vidovszky László, Lázár Gábor valamint a PTE Elektronikus zenei szak hallgatóinak kiállítása a 2B galériában) *Magyar Narancs*, 2014/2., január 9.
4. Ezoterikus avantgárd. A koncept/konceptuális paradigma. *Exindex*, 2014. augusztus 4. <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=hu&page=3&id=934> Utolsó letöltés: 2015. augusztus 29.
5. *Welt ohne Herz. Gábor Altorjay in the German Avant-Garde*, kiállítási leporelló, acb Galéria, 2015. (*Altorjay Gábor: Welt ohne Herz*, a kiállítást rend. Kürti Emese, acb Galéria, 2015. március 6 – április 16.)
6. Gábor Altorjay. In: *Bookmarks. Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde and Post-Conceptual Art from the Late 1960s to the Present*. Ed. Katalin Székely, Distanz, Berlin, 2015. 14.
7. Tamás Szentjóby. In: *Bookmarks. Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde and Post-Conceptual Art from the Late 1960s to the Present*. Ed. Katalin Székely, Distanz, Berlin, 2015. 68.
8. A szabadság anti-esztétikája. Az első magyarországi happening. *Exindex*, 2015. augusztus 24. <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=hu&page=3&id=967>. Utolsó letöltés: 2015. augusztus 29.
9. Intuitive Actions. In: *Acta Historiae Artium*. (ongoing publication)