

Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION THESES

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*The Journal Dokumentum and the Periodicals of the 1920s;
Self-Description, Contexts, Models*

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Primary Objectives

The aim of my dissertation is to carry out a contextual analysis of the *Dokumentum* [Document], a journal published between 1926 and 1927, edited by Lajos Kassák. I will focus on the relations between the journal's financial situation, its supposed and actual audience, its self-description, the literary, artistic, and theoretical contents as well as the advertisements it published, the biographical pasts of its contributors, and the conditions of the press at the time. The scale of this work is both smaller and bigger than what usually is expected of a research on a journal in the fields of the history of literature, fine art, or journalism. Unlike a paper from the former two disciplines, this one will not include thorough analyses of literary or artistic works, while unlike the latter, it will also refrain from monographically uncovering the history of the journal, processing all the information available. Instead, I am interested in the internal relations and especially the tensions in this avant-garde magazine, *heterogenous* by nature. By heterogenous, I mean that “internal” (e.g. literary works) and “external” (e.g. literary institutions) areas of art—as usually described in a metaphoric manner by the Hungarian literary history writing—meet in these periodicals.

My dissertation employs a new way of looking at the literary matrix of relations of this short period, studying it by

reconstructing the points of view of avant-garde authors. Examining historical sources, my intention is to understand the parallel perspectives of avant-garde artists, thus opposing the traditions of literary history writing in considering the journal *Nyugat* [West] as one of the centers, not the center. The difference between the *Nyugat* and, for example, the *Színházi Élet* [Theater life], the *Napkelet* [Sunrise or East], or the *Szózat* [Appeal]—a scope as wide as possible, with magazines associated with the traditional Modernism in contact with Kassák, mass culture, the Modernism associated with the power elites, and the far right—didn't seem to be as significant to the actors of the avant-garde as it seems to current readers. As far as the contributors of the *Dokumentum* are concerned, these journals were the producers as much as the sustainers of the hegemony, enforcing or legitimizing the cultural and political status quo in Hungary in diverse aesthetic and intellectual quality. Therefore, I am addressing the self-descriptions of the *Dokumentum* contributors, as well as the press reactions to them and their works, not as debates among authors with different artistic views, but as clashes between the discourses opposing and strengthening the hegemony.

Methodology

I am employing the terminology of *periodical studies*, a basic term of which is *periodical codes*, a set of markers with which journals communicate in the social sphere. The periodical code is convenient not only in interpreting the content—which is parallel to the *internal periodical code*—of the *Dokumentum*, it also helps understanding the magazine’s press context, the channels used to reach readers, the way editors financially secured its publication and managed its distribution; the latter tasks compose the journal’s *external periodical code*. Periodical studies allow the analysis of tensions between internal and external periodical codes; e.g., why did the *Dokumentum* advertise commodities (even luxury products) accessible only to the bourgeoisie, whereas they published theoretical writings harshly critical of the Capitalist conditions, and they strived for the education of the working class.

My dissertation is based on fundamental research, meaning that I am intending to carry out the reconstruction of this short period between 1924 and 1927—the launch and its backstory of the *Dokumentum*—using previously mostly unknown, partly unavailable sources found in public and private collections. Reconstruction not in the sense of an unreflected, mechanic account of data, but the understanding of the contemporary positions and interpretations of the avant-garde,

achieved by looking beyond the distorted or manipulative recollections of eyewitnesses, as well as the automatisms of retrospective interpreters, incorporating the sources (letters and other archival materials) I have recently uncovered, completed with an survey of the press of the time, which, until now, was taken into consideration in this regard only to a limited extent, despite being available.

Results

Although I do not intend to accomplish a full report on the subject, still, this paper is the most detailed study on the *Dokumentum* so far. The chapter *Prequels to the Dokumentum* analyzes the circumstances that predefined the publication of the journal; financial conditions, putting together the editorial board, and the position the forming group occupied in the literary field. Considering them as short-lived precursors of the *Dokumentum*, I look into the strategies employed by such actors of the Hungarian cultural scene, which were not socially or economically embedded; how did they reach or create an audience? Recounting how Kassák and his colleagues organized their return from Vienna to Budapest, I highlight the *Dokumentum*'s role in the process. As part of the strategy, Kassák tried to settle his legal and symbolic legitimacy already from Vienna. Between 1925 and 1927, Kassák and his partner,

Jolán Simon, were remarkably conscious and aware in constructing, or rather influencing Kassák's media representation and the critical reaction to his works.

The chapter *The Self-Description and Editorial Policy of the Dokumentum: A "Synthetic" Journal* introduces the context of the magazine that belonged to a typical group of periodicals of the European avant-garde of the 1920s, the "synthetic" journals. Following World War I, some avant-garde artists strived for synthesis, which, instead of returning to past achievements, they thought to have found in combining the different fields of art—and even disciplines outside the art world, e.g. natural, technical, and social sciences. Instead of a descriptive, documentarist approach, the *Dokumentum* addressed its own present in an interpretative, even prescriptive manner. The way the same topics the popular press also discussed were selected and framed together resulted in a new quality, or *synthesis*, as contemporaries said.

The chapter *Contemporary Reception of the Dokumentum* reveals the way the reception of the journal was affected by the magazine's self-description and the reception patterns—primarily the interpretation strategies of *isolation* and *neutralization*—toward the avant-garde in Hungary. Those critical of the *Dokumentum* were especially susceptible to the periodical's efforts in organizing the scene, as they understood it (correctly) as an ambition to reform the literary field. This is

reflected in the reception of the Kassák oeuvre around 1927. The reception of his 1926 avant-garde anthology entitled *Tisztaság könyve* [Book of Purity] was ambivalent, his journal *Dokumentum* met an unfriendly welcome, while his autobiography entitled *Egy ember élete* [A Man's Life] had an unprecedented critical success before, marking his breakthrough. Reviews praise *A Man's Life* as opposed to his avant-garde works, suggesting that the former had developed despite his conscious editing or intentions, unlike his avant-garde works and leaflets, which he had created very carefully, in a “program-like” manner. This juxtaposition transposes the terms employed to acknowledge *A Man's Life* (a work *based on experiences, honest, pure*) and the appropriate counterterms maintained for his avant-garde pieces and the *Dokumentum* (*artificial, incomprehensible*) to instruments of praise and punishment. The same pattern is evident among the reviews on Kassák's posters that provided the artist's income, legitimacy, and prestige. The mainstream media and the professional press of graphic art both praised the achievements of avant-garde artists in graphic design and typography, yet they isolated these from their avant-garde practice (e.g. editing the *Dokumentum*) and their relevant theoretical writings.

The chapter *Causes of the End of the Dokumentum* addresses the causes that resulted in this. The magazine was unsuccessful in securing a significant position in the public

sphere. Political and censorial conditions, as well as the contemporary intellectual milieu were unfavorable toward periodicals like the *Dokumentum*, which expressed radical programs with no supportive community or a solid financial background.

The chapter *Early 20th-Century Interpretation Patterns of the Hungarian Press Toward the Avant-Garde (1909–1926)* continues those research tendencies that study the avant-garde as part of the literary field. In order to grasp the dynamics of the literary field at the time, I give a comparative reading of the manifestos of the *Dokumentum* and several avant-garde and Modernist magazines. I study the contemporary press with the same attitude, describing the critics writing about the avant-garde, as *gatekeepers* checking on *new incomers*. In my understanding, criticisms are texts that outline what the time and its conditions still allowed to express, serving as an explanation for the significance the discourse on the language of the avant-garde, labelled as “incomprehensible,” had at the time. I was interested in the strategies with which, on the one hand, avant-garde authors strived for legitimation in the literary field, and on the other, critics from the other side intended to stigmatize, neutralize, or isolate certain avant-garde pieces, acknowledging one *as opposed to* another by the same author.

The chapter *Network and Models of 1920s Avant-Garde Journals in Europe* discusses the international context of the

Dokumentum. In drawing an accurate portrait of the avant-garde network's functioning, the *cultural transfer* theory may be useful. Once applied to avant-garde journals, this approach does not describe their relations according to hierarchical "radiation" (*rayonnement*) or "influences," or an unbound flow, but understands them as a series of rereadings, providing the research of East Central European—as well as further traditionally "periferical," e.g. South American—cultures with a crucial instrument. Addressing the cultural transfers allows the proper understanding of East Central European journal like the *Dokumentum*, which composed their programs from elements of initially incompatible tendencies, referring to French Surrealism, international Constructivism, as well as Italian Futurism. I view these "syncretic" magazines similar to the *Dokumentum* not as secondary phenomena, but periodicals critically rethinking and embracing international trends, occasionally becoming trendsetters, thus having an influence backward, toward the "West" as well—the *Ma* [Today], the journal *Kassák* edited in Vienna is just one of the examples.

As part of the research, I had to reevaluate the journals' self-descriptions and a current interpretation tendency as well. Both the avant-garde magazines and its researchers today suggest that the most significant feature of avant-garde journals was the democratic, non-hierarchical, multilingual, transnational, flow-based network they composed. However, this either was true

only to a certain extent, or didn't belong to the journals' primary functions, having a different meaning in each case. To provide examples, I present a case study on three journals—potential models for the *Dokumentum*—similar in structure yet diverse in their ambitions, which promoted each other. The *Manomètre*, for example, imagined a non-hierarchical network indeed, constituting, however, an exception in this, for which the editors' financially independent situation outside the literary institutional system may serve as explanation. The primary ambition of the Parisian *L'Esprit nouveau*, edited, among others, by Le Corbusier, was to win actors of the market to the realization of the radical ideas on modernisation proclaimed in the magazine, successfully, in fact, having even their own pavilion at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris. The thematically similar Futurist *Noi*, published at the same time in Rome, aimed at shaping the Fascist cultural politics—with results minor compared to their expectations, yet traceable—, and in line with this ambition, they described the relation between the Italian Futurism and the foreign avant-garde tendencies in a hierarchical fashion, considering the former authentic and the latter secondary. Unlike these, while referring to both periodicals and even translating their articles and acquiring reproductions, the *Dokumentum* in Budapest was considered far-left, utopian, and remained isolated.

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