

Introduction

This book is an attempt to problematize the relation between the adoption of European modernity as a cultural model in Bulgaria after the foundation of the independent state and the assimilation/ practising of modernisms.

The discussion on modernisms goes beyond the frame of form and style to present relationships with the modernization of the society – urban life, level of development of polygraphy, integration of women in the artistic life. The concentration on artistic contacts on the Balkans during the 1920–s and 1930–s gives an opportunity to draw parallels with other European trans-national artistic manifestations and circles.

I can't offer a new and unknown constructivist, suprematist or another avant-garde artist or tendency from the first decades of XX century in Bulgaria. Neither would it be easy to offer a fascinating history of an avant-garde work, which has influenced other artistic forms.

On the contrary – **Difficulties of historicizing** the local and the marginal are a challenging topic, whose importance goes beyond the local context. Discussing the connection of artistic phenomena in Bulgaria and the Balkans with the European narrative, and, at the same time, the impossibility for them to be completely integrated in it, seems to be important for any a-central position.

The notions modernism / modernisms, modernity, balkanism (introduced by the historian Maria Todorova) are problematized in a milieu of contemporary texts. The history of notions would take us far away from the specific study. My desire is just to give reference points for the use of these notions in this study of the artistic relations and interactions.

According to the article titled Modernism in Encyclopaedia Universalis¹ the notion came in use in Italy to designate a phenomenon concerning Catholicism. In the next years it came to designate phenomena in the social life, science and culture.

In the field of our interest – visual arts during the XX century – the artistic value in its autonomy was imposed as the only relevant value of a work of art, according to the modernist concept. My statement, on the ground of contemporary determination for multiple (art) histories, is that multiple modernisms describe a specific connection of artistic endeavour with the human existence in the modern industrialised world. I would accept a point of view, proposed by Charles Harisson², who acknowledged the contradiction in the concept of modernism these days. He puts the question: whether modernism manifests realism – i.e. the degree of involvement of the works of art with the human existence in that modern epoch, or whether it can be reduced to a set of formal qualities.

In the case of Bulgaria and the Balkans, my idea is to trace some multi-disciplinary area between the study of form and style and the context of the artistic practices. Western

European modernisms took advantage of the industrial and urban development. The lack of social resources goes a long way towards explaining the lack of certain layers of artistic culture, the weakness in the definition of these practices, the unfulfilled promise of experimentation and freedom – on the Balkans or elsewhere.

In his article “The Premises of Modern Art”, Stephen Bann³ defended the thesis that the institutional character of the French artistic practice offered the base of the modernist initiative. In that context, the connection of modernism as representational features with the artistic institutions – Academy, Salons, Art Criticism, etc. – became evident. I have to mention also the study of Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina⁴ on the relationships between modern practices and modernism in the French painting from XIX century, which is very important for this approach.

The purpose of my research on the art in Bulgaria and the Balkans is to discuss the interdependencies between the artistic institutions of the modern times following the European model and the appropriation / manifestation of multiple modernisms. What is of special interest are the conditions for extinction of the borderline between the so-called fine arts (in the Salons and Museums) and the artistic activities in the urban space, as well as the conditions for artistic exchanges on the Balkans.

If we admit that modernism is the connection of works of art with human existence, then, the reason for the missing modernist tendencies in Bulgaria could be the inadequate degree of modernization following the European model – industrialism, modernization of urban environment, of the artistic institutions, private interest in art. This situation could affect the character of artistic contacts as well.

Modernity as a social practice and way of living manifests itself in different (all) fields of activities.

The word “modernity” appeared in texts by Theophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire around 1850. According to Jean Baudrillard⁵ this is the moment when the self-reflexive society started to regard the modernity as a cultural model.

In the domain of culture, Anthony Smith⁶ stressed the link of the modernity to the nation-state, together with other positively and negatively defined features.

As the model of “modernization” was (West)European achievement, at the beginning of XX century it was Western Europe that had the knowledge about the potential of modernization in the non-western world⁷. Colonialism presents itself as a universal agency of this cultural model.

The issue of **modernity in the Balkans** relates to the notion of “Balkanism” and, through it, to the Postcolonial Theory, in the book by Maria Todorova “Imagining the Balkans”⁸. “Balkanism” was introduced as similar to the notion of “Orientalism”. M.Todorova pays special attention to the similarities and differences between the notions “orientalism”, introduced by Edouard Said, and the notion of “Balkanism”.

After the ideas of the Western Enlightenment, the East came to be identified with industrial backwardness and lack of advanced social relations⁹. A peculiarity of the Balkans is their transitional status, their “in-betweenness” (M.Todorova’s expression). They have

always evoked the image of a bridge between East and West, which could be broken. But at the same time it is impossible to emancipate them from the European narrative, since the Balkans are part of Europe.

This discourse gives a possibility for a contextual approach to the relationship between Eastern and Western Modernism. Also, it raises debates on today's globalizing / westernizing cultural policy¹⁰.

Let's forget for a moment the (multiple) contexts and experience the position of a spectator.

If the work doesn't appeal to me, I do not need a discussion either of form and style, or of context. Difficulties arise when I like the work but – common situation – I can't inscribe it in my systematized art historical knowledge (I find, for instance, that it was created much later than images of this style in Western Europe). Only in such situation some context could be helpful.

In the position of a spectator, I need to regard the artistic practice as related to different circumstances and domains of activity, like religion, policy, technologies, etc. Knowledge of the history of form and style is important, but not sufficient part of the interpretation of a work of art.

Could I present my involvement with the work of art as universally valid? It is hardly likely. I could verbalise arguments and associations of different orders from my personal experience.

A perfect spectator – professional or amateur (Sunday spectator) – could hardly be constructed and, in this sense, created by a unified art historical education. Historicising is possible as an occupation with the specific that concerns us. But what defines irrevocably the spectator is his/ her involvement with the work of art, which motivates him/ her to acquire knowledge of or to construct a context.

The proposed research includes a series of texts to which others can be added without deviating from the theme. It does not aim at arguing entirely and completely the formulated thesis. Such a task would be unachievable and this impossibility of „exhausting“ the theme is one of its merits.

By genre the research is a collection of studies related to one another and debating in the broad frame of the relation between the modernization of artistic life and the adoption / manifestation of modernisms in Bulgaria and on the Balkans.

During the last few years the integral historical research is often replaced by critical studies with looser interdependence. The history of art is presented as histories of works of art, visual studies in one or another methodological field.

„Modernisms and Modernity“ tries to test the achievements of the contextual approaches on the contradictory „Balkan area“. The effort is not directed towards one single historical reconstruction – different suggestions for a context according to the positions of the writers are possible – but towards defining my today's point of view on the changes that occurred during the first half of the XXth century. I am convinced that „histories“ con-

cern us mostly because of their presence today and it would not be hard to find implicit parallels with the contemporary moment within the texts.

The aim of this book is to present a state of an open project and of my long lasting engagement with the theme.

Notes

¹ Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1996.

² Charles Harisson, Modernism, in: Robert S. Nelson – Richard Schiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago – London, 1996, pp. 142–155.

³ Stephen Bann, The Premises of Modern Art, in: Christos M. Joachimides – Norman Rosenthal (eds.), *The Age of Modernism. Art in the 20th Century*, Berlin – Stuttgart, 1997, pp.517–524.

⁴ Nigel Blake and Francis Francina. Modern Practices of Art and Modernity, in: Francis Francina ...[et al.] *Modernity and Modernism. French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*. Yale University Press 1993, pp. 50–140.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, Modernit , in: *Encyclopaedia Universalis*. 1996, pp. 552–554.

⁶ Anthony D. Smith. Nationalism and Modernity, in: Timothy O. Benson (ed.) *Central European Avant-gardes: Exchange and transformation, 1910–1930*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2002, pp. 68–80. On this issue Anthony D. Smith referred to Ernest Gellner and other authors.

⁷ Wolf Lepenies. A Self-Critical Modernity or Europe's Century Nears its End, in: Christos M. Joachimides – Norman Rosenthal (eds.) (See note 4), p. 37.

⁸ Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 / Мария Тодорова. *Балкани и балканизъм*. Изд. "Фондация българска наука и култура". С. 1999.

⁹ See: Larry Wolff, Introduction, in: *Inventing Eastern Europe: The map of civilization on the mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994, pp. 1–16. In this text Larry Wolff shows the conventional division of Europe into East and West as an invention of the Western Enlightenment. Maria Todorova referred to this important book.

¹⁰ We have just to refer to the maps of Europe, published in the catalogue of Los Angeles Exhibition in 2002 (Timothy O. Benson (ed.) *Central European Avant-gardes: Exchange and transformation, 1910–1930*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2002) to make obvious the question how (cultural) maps are constructed. According to these ones only Bulgaria and Albania are still on the Balkans, if we assume that Greece belongs to Europe and other countries – to Central Europe. What should I do then with my de-constructed Balkan context? Or are there many equally valid possibilities for context constructions?