

Rethinking Central Europe – a perspective for comparative literature?

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First, I would like to define the topic of my presentation more precisely: I will try to question the present topicality of the idea of Central-Europe, as it has been developed mainly in the mid-eighties and starting from that try to characterize perspectives and goals of a comparative literature dealing with so called Central-European topics.

The Hungarian writer György Konrád, with his essay *The dream of Central-Europe* one of the most important voices in the debate on Central-Europe in the eighties, published a little book in 1999 which is called *The enlargement of the Centre. Europe and Eastern-Europe at the end of the 20th century*.¹ At the very beginning of his text, Konrád mentions some questions, often heard after 1989, for example: What remains of Central-Europe, now on the eve of EU-enlargement? Such questions suggest that after the fall of the Berlin Wall the idea of Central-Europe has become an obsolete idea. And of course some aspects of the Central-European dream, as it was dreamt in oppositional circles in Budapest, Prague, Warsaw or in exile seem antiquated today: Europe is no longer divided into two blocks, almost all Central-European countries are politically and economically connected with the West and are going to be members of the European Union within the next two or three years. So, Central Europe – an idea from yesterday? Yes, but only in its political dimension. Today, a confederation of Central-European countries doesn't need to be discussed any longer, as well as there is no need for any nostalgia. And also the strong antirussian attitude of some Central-European intellectuals should be considered maybe as a product of the political situation before 1989. But what is Konrád's answer:

Central-Europe has grown after 1989. If no Iron Curtain disfigures the countryside between Vienna and Budapest, Berlin and Prague, when the two sides of Central Europe sooner or later are part of the same unions and we all belong to the countries of the European Union, then our past and our horizon will connect us and the separation of yesterday will become meaningless.²

¹ György Konrád, *Die Erweiterung der Mitte. Europa und Osteuropa am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Wien 1999.

² György Konrád, *Die Erweiterung...*, 9 (translation: M.E.)

So the thought that Konrád expresses is that the central part of the continent is constituting itself again, is rediscovering its immanent connections, is coming back in our awareness. For more than forty years Central Europe had been divided by the Iron Curtain and had had no place in a Europe of East and West. But today, after this border has disappeared, when the two sides of Central Europe are growing together, the way from West to East leads via Central Europe. This is how the title of Konrád essay should be understood. Of course this is, facing the actual enlargement process of the EU, also a play on words but with a very real dimension. Central Europe is recovering its shape (although this is a shape without fixed borders): But this process is visible in the discovering of a common cultural space, with its immanent intellectual connections, with its reciprocal influences and receptions, which led to similar styles and ways of artistic and literary expression. In addition there is an awareness of a common history.

This is, about what I would like to speak. About Central Europe as a common cultural sphere and about the possibilities to do research on it. In my opinion a lot of important impulses for this were given by the debate of the eighties, so this I will take as my starting point.

Maybe I should say two words about my interest for this issue. At the moment I am working on my dissertation about the Polish avant-garde in the early twenties, precisely about a group which is called "Formisci Polscy" (in English: Polish Formists). And during the research, I observed that there are a lot of parallels between contemporary phenomena in Hungarian or Czech art and literature. This is why I'll try to ask if there is a special Central-European appearance of the avant-garde, what are the analogies, what are the differences. I am going to make these questions more precise later on in my presentation.

If therefore my interest in Central-Europe bases mainly on a question of comparative literature, I hope I can find a broader context for my arguments, so that they are relevant for a wider audience and show a possible approach to Central-European topics also in regard to other disciplines. But it is necessary to keep in mind that a definition of Central-Europe is possible in different ways: this depends on the perspective, if it is done from a historical, political or cultural point of view. And I think the confusion that often arises with the term "Central-Europe" is first of all a result of using one definition in a foreign context or of mixing them up.

Central Europe as a common cultural and literary space

How could it be possible to define Central Europe in this sense? What are the main phenomena, which such a definition should take as its starting point?

This central part of Europe is a space of cultural diversity: different peoples and ethnic groups are living here together, a lot of dialects and languages are meeting here. The result are intensive cultural relations, interchange of ideas, reciprocal influences, stimulations and inspirations. Milan Kundera paraphrased it in his well-known essay *The tragedy of Central-Europe*, with: “*the greatest variety within the smallest space*”.³

Of course at many times in Central-European history this living together in a multicultural atmosphere had extremely different consequences than the ones I mentioned. The Holocaust, when the majority of the Jewish population of Central-Europe was killed, but also expulsions after World War II or the war in Ex-Yugoslavia could be named here as examples. Also the question about the status of minorities seems always to be of interest in Central-Europe. (A very impressive literary document about interwar Central-European nationalisms is Miroslav Krležas novel *Banquet in Blithuania*).

The nationalisms and ethnic tensions must not be concealed, otherwise Central-Europe is described as an idyll, which has nothing in common with reality. But I would like to come back now to the more positive sides of Central-European multiculturalism. Konrád wrote about this in his *Dream of Central-Europe*:

Ethnic reality did not correspond with national frames [(or borders)]. [...] But maybe it is not possible, to make a political map corresponding with the ethnic map.

Let us, instead of national frames, adopt the ethnic reality as a cultural one, which must be viewed within the historical context of the whole Central-European space.[...] Being Central-European is an attitude, a Weltanschauung, an aesthetic sensitivity for complexity, for the polyglotness of points of view. [...] Being Central-European means, to consider variety as a value.”⁴

³ Milan Kundera, *The tragedy of Central-Europe*, in: “The New York Review of Books”, April 26th 1984, 33.

⁴ „*Der staatliche Rahmen und die ethnische Wirklichkeit deckten sich nicht. [...] Vielleicht ist es auch nicht möglich, eine politische Landkarte zu machen, die der ethnischen Landkarte entspricht.*

Lassen wir die staatlichen Rahmen, und erheben wir die ethnische Wirklichkeit zu einer kulturellen Wirklichkeit, die es gilt, im historischen Kontext des gesamten mitteleuropäischen Raums zu betrachten.[...]

Thanks to this Central-European diversity, many specific literary and cultural spaces were formed at different times. One example is Galicia and the Bukowina, especially in the 19th and in the first 30 years of the 20th century (until World War II). A part of it, the borderland between Poland, Slovakia and the Ukraine was focussed recently in two essays published together, one written by the Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk, the other by the Ukrainian writer Jurij Andruchovyc. Their book is called *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Srodkowa* [*My Europe. Two essays about the so-called Central-Europe*].⁵ This shows that something like "rediscovering" is possible, but not in form of a nostalgic tracing. Other examples are the cities of Prague or – especially around 1900 – Vienna, also the Balkan or the borderland in the North, where the Polish, the Lithuanian, the Belorussian and the Jewish culture meet. I could also mention here cultural goods, for instance churches, palaces or graveyards, which are, in consequence of new borders in Central Europe after World War II, located in foreign countries. Maybe they are not an original product of the Central-European cultural diversity, but I think the way how to deal with them, this means above all conservation and care, could refer to that multiculturalism.

In case of literature the mentioned diversity and intensive interchange of ideas led to similar ways of expression, common motifs and subjects – always across the borders of one culture, of one language. These are topics of Central-European comparative literature. Hereby the question is fundamental, how this literary space could be described, could be caught as a whole? The point is, how a greater literary space could be discerned, a space where lot of its phenomena are better understandable in front of the background of the knowledge not only of one, but also of other literatures. Furthermore it is important to ask, how this space emerged, in which extensions it exists and what are the most important determinants that are constituting this space.

One possibility, to describe this "network" in terms of comparative literature, is to research the so-called "genetic relations" and "typological analogies". This is a

Mitteleuropäer sein ist eine Haltung, eine Weltanschauung, eine ästhetische Sensibilität für das Komplizierte, die Mehrsprachigkeit der Anschauungsweisen. [...] Mitteleuropäer sein heißt, die Vielfalt für einen Wert halten.“, György Konrád, “Der Traum von Mitteleuropa”, in: Erhard Busek; Gerhard Wilfinger [Hrsg.], *Aufbruch nach Mitteleuropa. Rekonstruktion eines versunkenen Kontinents*, Wien 1986, 89-90. (translation: M.E.)

⁵ Andrzej Stasiuk; Jurij Andruchovyc, *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Srodkowa*, Czame 2000.

theoretical proposition made by the Slovak scholar Dionýz Durišin.⁶ Similarity - in relevant cases also differences - in literary works are explained by different forms of contacts and by similar assumptions that might have influenced the genesis of a literary work. Among the contacts, hence among the "genetic relations" Durišin counts personal acquaintance between writers, their correspondence (these are more external factors), but also translations and the reception of certain works etc. (more internal factors). Their influence on a work of art is visible through various forms of imitation, mottos, through adaptations but also through parody. In the case of the "typological analogies" there are no forms of contacts. Similarities in certain literary works (also in different languages) are explained by a comparable social or historical situation or by a comparable "inner necessity" of the particular literatures, for instance that they are on a similar stage of their development.

Of course Durišin's model is very fundamental, and because of this maybe very general. But I think the practicability, to bring the particular Central-European literatures with the help of "genetic contacts" and "typological analogies" in relation, has become clear. Starting from the results of that research, an attempt to characterize the Central-European literary space can be made. It is obvious that this remains a space without fixed borders and changing its shape at certain times. Later on in my presentation I will try, related to the topic of my dissertation project and based on Durišin's model, to formulate some concrete questions, in order to make my argumentation on this point more clear.

The idea of Central Europe today

In order to define perspectives and goals for a present research on Central-Europe, it is useful, in my opinion, to bring to mind the discussion about Central-Europe in the eighties. This debate was initiated basically by two texts: Milan Kundera's *The tragedy of Central-Europe* from 1983 and György Konrád's text *The dream of Central-Europe*, published in 1984.

Of course, this discussion originated to a great extent in the political order of post-war Europe, namely the continent's division into two spheres of influence. In this bipolar order there was no place for a centre. Hence, Kundera described Central-Europe once as that part of Europe, "*situated geographically in the center – culturally in the West and politically in the East.*"⁷ Milosz also used Central-Europe in relation to those countries that became victims of the

⁶ In his book: Dionýz Durišin, *Vergleichende Literaturforschung. Versuch eines methodisch-theoretischen Grundrisses*, Berlin (Ost) 1972.

⁷ Kundera, *The tragedy...*, 33.

Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, this means also the Baltic states. The thus initiated discussion was among others an attempt to draw the people's attention to the central part of Europe. Konrád once remarked in 1987: (quote) "*I'm only saying that we are here. In the geographical centre of Europe.*"⁸ In this sense the debate about a region between the East and the West began. And this already questioned the division of Europe - in its political meaning, but also in a broader context. Karl Schlögel once wrote in his well known essay *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts* [*The centre lies eastward*]: (quote) "'Central-Europe', the word itself is a provocation of the wall in the head."⁹

The reconstruction of Central-Europe (I refer here to a well known book about Central-Europe) took place in the discovering of mutualities, for instance of historical relations, lasting (already) for centuries. But also the intensive cultural contacts and interchanges, between the countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain as well as between them and Western Europe were focussed on. In addition to Central-European, it was also referred to common European (this means occidental) traditions, for example western Christianity, common art styles like Baroque or common intellectual roots, namely the Enlightenment. There is also no doubt about the European character of certain literary trends like the romantic movement, symbolism, as well as avant-garde.

In spite of its political intension, the debate about Central-Europe in the eighties was to a great extend a cultural debate. And I think only in this regard should its present topicality be understood.

This topicality manifests itself through three aspects. First a new awareness for Central-Europe, for its history and culture has been aroused and secondly - closely linked to the first point - the cultural wealth of this part of Europe has begun to emerge - a wealth that nearly would have disappeared, after the destructions of two World Wars, after Central-European wars and after the ideologized cultural policy of some totalitarian regimes. To rediscover this wealth means to catch Central-Europe today, to find - so to speak - concrete traces of an utopia. The preconditions that allow to do this were created by the political changes of 1989, even if this is an ideal case which has not been realized everywhere yet. So, much of Central-European culture has to be rediscovered

⁸ "*Ich sage nur, dass wir da sind. In der geographischen Mitte Europas.*", György Konrád, "Entwurf eines mitteleuropäischen Selbstbildnisses", in: G.K., *Stimmungsbericht*, Frankfurt (Main) 1988, 162. (translation: M.E.)

⁹ "*Mitteleuropa', das Wort selbst ist bereits eine Provokation an der Mauer im Kopf.*", Karl Schlögel, "Die Mitte liegt ostwärts. Die Deutschen, der verlorene Osten und Mitteleuropa", in: K.S., *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts. Europa im Übergang*, München/Wien 2002. (translation: M.E.)

today. The continent's division for more than forty years also impeded the intellectual interchange between both sides of the Iron Curtain. The consequence is that the knowledge about Central-Europe, e.g. about its art, its literature in Western Europe is still very poor.

Furthermore in the case of Central-Europe it is obvious that the knowledge of the common Central-European culture as a knowledge about the other (the neighbour) is an important precondition to understand also ones own cultural identity. Konrád dedicates in *The dream of Central-Europe* a lot of space to this question. He writes: (quote)

Given is variety. [...] The better we know each other, the better we know our neighbours, the more we are Central-Europeans. [...] The belonging to a small nation is linked to an above-average obligation to learn. [...] Why should we care about each other? Because we are neighbours. [...] We are not monolingual.[...]

Whether we like each other or not, we have credit only together. It is horrible, to which great extend, we don't understand the other's language. We lost German, our common language, not least because of the Germans. We have to learn the other's language, for the cultural-idea of Central-Europe to be not only past, but also future."¹⁰

The questions Konrád asks are still of immediate interest. Much of Central-European culture is understandable, or is better understandable, in its relation to other cultures, to other national contexts. One example could be Silesian culture, with its relations to the German, the Polish and maybe also the Czech culture. This is also or maybe above all true in the case of Germany and Austria.

And thirdly, it is a matter of a new reflection about Europe, about Europe as a whole, as a unity, starting also from the understanding of Central-Europe. "*Without the experience of Eastern-Europe, the continent's Western half is*

¹⁰ *Gegeben ist die Vielfalt. [...] Je besser wir uns gegenseitig kennen, je besser wir unsere Nachbarn kennen, desto mehr sind wir Mitteleuropäer. [...] Die Zugehörigkeit zu einer kleinen Nation ist verbunden mit einer überdurchschnittlich großen Verpflichtung zum Lernen. [...] Warum sollen wir uns umeinander kümmern? Weil wir Nachbarn sind. [...] Wir sind nicht einsprachig [...] Ob wir uns nun gegenseitig gefallen oder nicht, wir gelten nur zusammen etwas. Es ist schrecklich, in welchem Ausmaß wir die Sprache des anderen nicht verstehen. Deutsch, unsere gemeinsame Sprache haben wir nicht zuletzt wegen der Deutschen verloren. Wir müssen die Sprache des anderen lernen, damit die mitteleuropäische Kulturidee nicht nur Vergangenheit ist, sondern auch Zukunft.*", Konrád, "Der Traum...", 87, 88, 91, 92 und 94. (translation: M. E.)

not able to understand the whole”, writes the Slovenian Drago Jancar.¹¹ Central-Europe must not be understood as secluded in itself. But what is this Central-European experience, Jancar mentions, what is Central-Europe’s contribution to Europe. Of course, this should be understood as an enrichment, not in an utilitarian sense. There are mainly three aspects stressed by Central-European intellectuals in this context: first, culture as an important constituting factor of (European) identity, secondly a particular sensitivity for ethic values, like freedom, tolerance and dignity of the individual, (emerged e.g. from the experience of a life under a totalitarian regime) and thirdly the role of Central-Europe as a bridge between East and West. Unfortunately, I have not enough time to discuss these questions longer. But generally speaking, Central-Europe should not be considered as a possible solution for European problems we might have for instance concerning the role of culture or the importance of common shared values for our European consciousness. Central-Europe is, of course, not an alternative model to the EU. But Central-European experiences, in particular those after World War II, could be a good impulse to reflect about these topical questions.

An example of Central-European Comparative Literature: the research of the avant-garde

I will now, at the end of my presentation, try to formulate, based on the above described presuppositions, some questions for a concrete Central-European research project. As an example for doing that I will take the topic of my dissertation project, this means Polish and Central-European avant-garde.

The avant-garde was a common European trend in art and literature, approximately in the years between 1909 and World War II. There were many particular trends within the avant-garde, for instance Futurism in Italy and Russia, Dadaism, not only in Zurich, Expressionism in Germany and many others. The example of the avant-garde is very significant of the interchange of ideas in Europe: The Rumanian Tristan Tzara was the leader of Dadaism in Zurich. The Russian painters Wassilij Kandinskij and Alexej Jawlensky were members of the artistic group “Der Blaue Reiter” in Munich. The Hungarians Lajos Kassák and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy were at the “Bauhaus” in Weimar. Besides that it is remarkable that the centre of the Hungarian avant-garde between 1920 and 1925

¹¹ “*Ohne die Erfahrung Osteuropas kann die Westhälfte des Kontinents das Ganze nicht verstehen*”, Drago Jancar, *Die Welt als Gegensatz begreifen*, in: “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” vom 19.5.2001, o.S. (translation: M.E.)

was Vienna. A lot of artists were forced to emigrate after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. Their review *Ma [Today]*, which was published also in Vienna, was one of the most important European avant-garde reviews. The Polish expressionistic group “Bunt” [“Rebellion”] cooperated with the Berlin gallery and review *Die Aktion*. A lot of other names from the first 30 years of the 20th century, whose importance for European art and literature is undoubted, could be mentioned here as well: Kafka, Musil or Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz.

I have spoken about the awareness that has to be aroused for Central-Europe. In this sense research on the Central-European avant-garde should be done. The particular trends of Central-European avant-garde are still not very well known. This might partly be caused by the political history of Central-Europe: A continuation of the avant-garde’s ideas was first interrupted by World War II and afterwards hindered also by a ideologized literary science and art history in the fifties. Not before the sixties did the first studies about the avant-garde appear. But these are above all studies about “own” trends, and apart from singular exceptions¹² there are no comparative studies. The situation in the West is even worse: much of Central-European avant-garde is completely unknown or described only in a very generalized and simplified way. It was only in 1994 that a great exhibition in Bonn did present the Central-European avant-garde extensively for the first time.¹³

So it is necessary to catch the Central-European avant-garde adequately. The importance of this is maybe most visible in those cases, where there is no equivalent in Western Europe or Russia: in the case of Polish Formism, Czech Poetism or Yugoslav Zenitism. But also names like Expressionism, Futurism or Surrealism seem to have sometimes a different meaning in relation to Central-European phenomena, than in Germany, Italy or France.

This leads to the question, whether it is possible to speak of a specific Central-European avant-garde. A possibility for doing that could be to analyse the “genetic relations” or “typological analogies” as it has been described above.

¹² Zoran Konstantinovic (ed.), „*Expressionismus“ im europäischen Zwischenfeld*, Innsbruck 1978; Peter Drews, *Die slawische Avantgarde und der Westen. Die Programme der russischen, polnischen und tschechischen literarischen Avantgarde und ihr europäischer Kontext*, München 1983; Krisztina Passuth, *Les Avant-Gardes de l’Europe Centrale 1907-1927*, Paris 1988; Endre, Bojtár, *East-European Avant-Garde Literature*, Budapest 1992.

¹³ Cf. the catalogue: Ryszard Stanislawski, Christoph Brockhaus (Hg.), *Europa. Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, Katalog zur Ausstellung in vier Bänden, Bonn 1994

Although there are almost no personal contacts between artists from Cracow, Prague or Budapest and also the number of translations and exhibitions is very low, there are other forms of “genetic relations”: only to name the reception of the same texts, for instance of Marinetti’s first futuristic manifesto or of Apollinaire’s poetry. The question that has to be asked in this context is: do mutualities between Polish, Czech or Hungarian groups exist in those cases?. Which aspects do they reject? What is adopted and integrated (how?) into their own artistic creation? What is translated? Possible “typological analogies” could result from a similar situation of some Central-European literatures in the years around World War I. For example from the specific - sometimes very political - role of literature in Central-European societies, in addition to a particular type of the artist. But also historical events could be of importance: the Soviet Revolution of 1917 or the independence, obtained by some Central-European countries in 1918.

But also in the case of the avant-garde a - so to speak – common European perspective should not be ignored. It is interesting that the first groups of Central-European avant-garde were formed between 1914 and 1917, while groups in Western Europe already emerged around 1910 (in Russia 1912). Finally, the question about a definition of European avant-garde could be asked, a definition which is based on most of its trends, not only on Italian Futurism, Dadaism and French Surrealism.¹⁴

Summary

I recapitulate. Central-Europe has become a reality, it is no longer a dream, an utopia or a nostalgia. Thanks to the discussion of the eighties an awareness for this part of Europe has emerged. The look at a space with immense cultural wealth has been opened - this wealth is to be discovered and researched today. The goal is an understanding of Central-Europe as well as of Europe as a whole. The possibilities for this process have been created in 1989.

In his essay [*Mitteleuropa – aber wo liegt es?*] Timothy Garton Ash wrote in 1986, also disillusioning the mere abstract and immaterial concepts of Central-Europe: (quote)

Aber dieses neue Mitteleuropa ist eben noch nichts weiter als eine Idee. Noch existiert es nicht. Osteuropa existiert. Das neue Mitteleuropa muss erst noch gestaltet werden. Das geht nicht allein durch die ständige Wiederholung des Wortes Mitteleuropa [...]. Auch

¹⁴ This is not a critique of Peter Bürgers excellent study: *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt (Main)² 1993

nicht durch die Kultivierung eines Mythos. Wenn der Begriff Mitteleuropa je einen positiven Inhalt erhalten soll, so wird sich die Diskussion vom Deklamatorischen, Sentimentalen und Beschwörenden wegbewegen müssen, hin zu einer unsentimentalen und rigorosen Erforschung des wirklichen Erbes vom historischen Mitteleuropa (das genauso eine Geschichte der Trennungen wie der Vereinigungen ist) und hin zu den realen Bedingungen des heutigen Mitteleuropas (das genauso von Unterschieden wie von Ähnlichkeiten gekennzeichnet ist).¹⁵

I hope I didn't fail to show that this is possible and how it could be done.

Thank You very much for Your attention.

¹⁵ Timothy Garton Ash, "Mitteleuropa – aber wo liegt es?", in: T.G.A., *Ein Jahrhundert wird abgewählt. Aus den Zentren Mitteleuropas 1980–1990*, München/Wien 1990, 222.