

The Memory of the Avant-Garde and the New Wave in the Contemporary Serbian Novel

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This article is dealing with the topic of two past twentieth-century epochs in a few representative Serbian novels at the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. These are the 1980s and the New Wave era in Yugoslavia, an epoch close to the past that can still be written about from the perspective of an immediate witness, and the avant-garde era, that is, the period between the two world wars marked in art by different movements of the historical avant-garde. The novels Milenijum u Beogradu (Millennium in Belgrade, 2000) by Vladimir Pištalo, Vrt u Veneciji (The Garden in Venice, 2002) by Mileta Prodanović, and Kiša i hartija (Rain and Paper, 2004) by Vladimir Tasić are being interpreted. In these novels, it is particularly noteworthy that the two aforementioned epochs are most commonly linked as part of the same creative and intellectual currents in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Serbian literature / contemporary Serbian novel / literary avant-garde / New Wave / Zenitism / rock and roll / Pištalo, Vladimir / Prodanović, Mileta / Tasić, Vladimir

In Vladimir Tasić's *Farewell Gift* (2001), one of the key contemporary Serbian novels, the narrator at some points expresses a high appreciation of the two epochs. One is personally experienced, while the other has long been placed in historical niches and categories. The first case is about 1980s, which Tasić's hero defines as the age at which his nostalgia is greatest:

When she asked me what I missed the most, I told her about the Bronx, the run-down basement in the old Mlinpek Building on Radnička Street, where, long ago, The Coprokofievs used to have their gigs [...] but despite everything, I most missed those times when he used to play in the Bronx with The Coprokofievs, when everyone seemed to be playing or at least dancing, listening to music, ordering records from London from the Recommended Records Catalogue, opening each package as if inside there was something that could change the future. (Tasić 140–141)

In the second case, it is the avant-garde era that Tasić's hero, an emigrant to Canada, encounters at the Amsterdam Museum, just before leaving the European continent. Walking around the exhibit space, he also encounters names and exhibits from his native places.

When I walked out of the cafeteria, I noticed a row of display cases with manuscripts, sketches, letters and articles from yellowed newspapers and journals. On the front cover of one of the journals, the name *Zenit* was printed in Cyrillic characters. Next to it, there was a long text about Belgrade avant-garde, the Zenitists and Ljubomir Micić. I always had a certain reservations to both avant-garde and Belgrade; therefore, I was doubly skeptical towards Belgrade avant-garde. All their neo-medievalist trends and other faddisms looked at me like a collection of pointless imitations, as absurd as the tiny plastic gondola souvenirs that will puzzle archeologists when, one day, they excavate them from the ruins of Serbian settlements from Feketić to Svilajnac. And yet, in the City Museum in Amsterdam, a feeling of unexpected pride arouse in me. Look, I told myself, this is also a part of Europe. Maybe the whole concept of avant-garde – all of that gibberish about the future, geometrical constructions, twittering machines, the cultivation of culture in Petri dishes, and the painting of astral surfaces – was only empty talk; but eighty years ago and even later, the world was apparently going somewhere, and Belgrade kept pace with it. (Tasić 74–75)

Thus, in one major European capital, the protagonist of the *Farewell Gift* acquires a true idea of his own culture and of some of its lesser-known efforts, such as Zenitism for the wider world today. Since this encounter with the avant-garde art, one that comes from his own country, is the last thing that happens to the narrator before leaving the European continent, the avant-garde heritage becomes a kind of symbolic and spiritual baggage that he brings with him to the new continent.

This sporadic Tasić's touching on the avant-garde and the New Wave age and their high esteem, one on the personal and the other on the level of national culture, since his short novel has a different focus, might not have attracted our attention so much if in a similar period of time in Serbian literature there had not been several other novels with the focus on the topic of the New Wave age and activating the avant-garde heritage. It is precisely these novels, published at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century that we will deal with in our text. These are the novels *Milenijum u Beogradu* (*Millennium in Belgrade*) (2000) by Vladimir Pištalo, *Vrt u Veneciji* (*The Garden in Venice*) (2002) by Mileta Prodanović and *Kiša i hartija* (*Rain and Paper*) (2004) by the aforementioned Vladimir Tasić. This concentration of thematizing the epochs in a number of prominent novels in a given period of time provokes to look at its ways and reasons.

When we say “avant-garde,” first of all, we have in mind the historical avant-garde, that is, the numerous *-isms*, i.e. literary and artistic movements that appeared in European, as well as in Serbian and other South Slavic literatures in the first half of the twentieth century, primarily in the period between the two world wars,¹ although we will see below that some of these writers and novels dealt with some (neo) avant-garde currents that we associate with the second half of the twentieth century.

It should be said that in Serbian literature, the period between the two wars, especially the twenties, is characterized by a hasty change of a large number of different, mostly short-lived avant-garde movements. Some of them, such as Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism were part of some wider European movements, while these pan-European currents also had its domestic variants in the form of local movements, for example Sumatraism, Hypnism and the most successful, already mentioned, Zenithism. Perhaps more important than this is that these dynamic literary events gave birth to numerous important figures of modern Serbian literature, among them the greatest ones, such as Miloš Crnjanski, Rastko Petrović, and in part Ivo Andrić and Momčilo Nastasijević. These high artistic achievements are not restricted exclusively to literature, so great figures also appear in painting, let us just mention Sava Šumanović, according to many, the greatest Serbian painter of the twentieth century.

By New Wave and the New Wave Era, we mean the period during the 1980s on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, whose representatives were expressed primarily through popular music.² Unlike the aforementioned avant-garde period, which was dominated by poetry and painting, popular music took over the baton in the early 1980s.

¹ In the famous *History of Avant-Garde Literatures*, Guillermo de Torre focuses precisely on this interwar period, emphasizing that his book “essentially defines and studies one completed epoch, seen through its roots: an epoch between two wars (1918–1939)” (9), while in the famous book *Style Formation*, Alexander Flaker limits the avant-garde phenomenon in Europe to the period between 1910 and 1930 (see Flaker). Gojko Tešić in the *Serbian Literature Avant-Garde* sets the broadest range of avant-garde phenomena (including those considered proto-avant-garde) between 1902 and 1934 (see Tešić).

² According to Marija Ristivojević, this musical direction penetrated Yugoslavia from west to east, first appearing in Ljubljana and Zagreb, and only later in Belgrade. The author positions the duration of the New Wave in Belgrade from 1980 to 1983/84 (see Ristivojević). For Vladimir Djurić Djura, the phenomenon of the New Wave was present on the territory of the former Yugoslavia from 1978 to 1983 (8), while for Ivan Ivačković it is a movement that grew after Tito’s death (239).

As Vladimir Djurić Djura, a journalist, a publicist, but also a musician and the member of several rock and pop bands from the 1980s to the present, says in his popularly written *The New Wave Guide*, “the happy eighties carried a rapture. Everyone, like Jura Stublić from the group Film, thought it was possible to imagine life in the rhythm of dance music ... In the early 1980s, popular music simply floated the planet” (36), or as it is written in one of the novels that we will analyze in the continuation of the paper, “Indeed, in those days rock and roll seemed to be the only natural choice” (Prodanović 100).

Musically, the New Wave could be said to be the music that came after punk (see Ristivojević 89), and this musical direction “blended punk energy into various genres, most often reggae and ska. In the New Wave, one could also see the ambition to say something meaningful about politics” (Ivačković 239).

On the spiritual-ideological plane, a generation of the new-wavers “was unburdened by the fetishes of socialism; or used them for their own intellectual exhibitions ... or walked on them with their fists ... or broke them with its very appearance” (Ivačković 239). Djurić, in his previously mentioned *Guide*, estimates, probably too boldly, “that the New Wave was precisely the energy that overthrew the powerful despotic-communist system of Joseph Broz Tito and introduced people from these areas to the galimatias of American-influenced countries, called ‘the New world order’” (7–8).

The presence of avant-garde themes and heritage, as well as writing about rock music by the authors we deal with on this occasion is not a surprising thing, especially considering that Mileta Prodanović (1959) and Vladimir Pištalo (1960) have grown up in the circle of so-called young Serbian prose, which is the mark that has, with a good deal of critics, established itself for the generation of Serbian prose writers of postmodernism.³ A number of young Serbian prose writers felt considerable inspiration for avant-garde poetics. A striking example of such inspiration is Pištalo’s prose book *Manifestos* (1986), but also some of the works of Sava Damjanov and Sreten Ugričić.

Also, in this generation of Serbian authors, both prose writers and poets, there was a pronounced affinity for rock and roll. It was the time when rock music and popular culture became common and accepted topics in Serbian prose, whereas before that they had been more the exception and the excess. Let us mention on this occasion the sto-

³ The literature on “young Serbian prose” is quite extensive. See, e.g., Pantić and Damjanov.

rybooks of David Albahari *Seizure in the Shed* (1984)⁴ and Mihajlo Pantić's *Wonder in Berlin* (1987), as well as the short Albahari's novel *Zinc* (1988), one of the key works of Serbian prose in the eighties, which has, as the motto, Johnny Štulić's lyrics for the song "Like Yesterday."⁵

Two moments in time

In the novel *The Garden in Venice*, written by the Belgrade-based writer and painter Mileta Prodanović, one of those who personally experienced the "crazy eighties," the New Wave period from the early 1980s is set aside and set alongside the painful present of the 1990s, from which the novel's narrator and protagonist addresses us.⁶

The novel brings back the memory of the storyteller who found himself in a whirlwind of political events in the 1990s, more specifically the protests of citizens and the opposition over the forged local elections in 1996, the New Wave eighties, first of all a childhood friend

⁴ *Seizure in the Shed* was actually an intermediate and inter-ethnic project. In his *Chronicle of Yugoslav Popular Music in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, Ivačković also noted this phenomenon, pointing out this communication between different arts as an important feature of the New Age: "Writer David Albahari published a collection of stories *Seizure in the Shed*. Električni orgazam, one of the most popular bands of the New Wave movement, recorded the song of the same name on the album *How the Drum Tells*. The multimedia trilogy? No doubt it is!" (238).

⁵ The two mentioned authors were the main propagators of rock culture from the world of literature, as evidenced by their other activities. David Albahari edited the *New Wave Almanac in the SFRY* (1983), while, jointly with Pantić, he also edited the collection *Catch the Rhythm: Omnibus: Rock and Literature* (1990). The special publication of Belgrade magazine *Književna reč* of February 1984, titled *In the Service of Her Majesty*, written by Gregor Tomc and Peter Lovšin, the leading creative duo of the first Slovenian and Yugoslav punk group Pankrti, also convincingly testifies about the extent of the respect the literary audience had for rock music. The publication brought lyrics and theoretical-manifest texts of these two. It is interesting to note that this publication, with minor changes, experienced its book reprint in Belgrade in 2008.

⁶ The 1990s in the South Slavic area were marked by the disintegration of the SFR Yugoslavia and a series of war conflicts that accompanied the disintegration. In the case of Serbia, a great part of the 1990s were marked by rigorous international sanctions, turbulent internal political struggles between the government led by Slobodan Milošević and various opposition parties and movements, most often accompanied by mass demonstrations by opposition-minded citizens and eventually NATO bombing. In general, it could be said that the Serbian state and society in the last decade of the twentieth century went through a whole series of domestic and foreign political crises that left deep consequences on the daily lives of its citizens.

Mihajlo Lisičić Lisicki and the once great love Lina (Marceline). The total upset of his childhood friends and the death of once great love for which he simultaneously learns make the narrator evoke memories of a past epoch. In his story he touches on all the highlights of the New Wave times – rock and roll and history-making gigs that will be retold in years, as well as the cult places of Belgrade – SKC (Students' Cultural Centre) and the Academy (of Fine Arts), and significant media that promoted the sound of the New Wave, such as *Jukebox* music magazine.⁷

At the center of the epoch that is emerging in the memories of the narrator are Lina and Mihajlo Lisičić, alias El Lisicki. The duo was a part of the former music sensation of that time – the band Zenith FC. Their first concert, in his interpretation, opened the door to the era:

The time span that is usually recognized in the small circle of my friends by the term “great season” was estimated by subjective criteria. For someone, the “great season” began at a time when fast bands in the city suppressed the followers of “rock metaphysicists”; for someone a little later, when the “first league” of new rock groups was clearly singled out, when Rupa (The Pit) became the center of the nightlife at the Academy, and when, in the shadow of those who were already releasing praised records, the “second wave” of urban rock bands appeared ... I believe that there would be some who would, however boldly, claim that the great gate of this intense time was the first appearance of the band Zenith F. C. (Prodanović 95)

That first concert of this fictional band was an event that was talked about years later and where history happened, and it was therefore very prestigious in later stories to have attended the event. “If we were to gather everyone who claimed to have attended this gig, one might think that the venue was the size of a sports hall or a congress hall” (Prodanović 95).

After this very successful debut, this short-lived musical band gained a cult status. However, Lina quickly leaves the band following her other interests such as performance art.⁸ Prodanović's heroine first joined the Slovenian theater troupe Risk-Combo and reached BITEF,

⁷ In the aforementioned Ivačković's book, *Jukebox* magazine is referred to as the “New Wave Holly Bible” (250), while Djurić notes that this magazine “was largely responsible for the emergence of the New Wave in the SFRY, especially in the period 1979–1981, when thanks to the strong support of the *Jukebox* magazine, the groups Idoli, Šarlo Akrobata, Film, Električni orgazam, Haustor, Prljavo kazalište and others” (77).

⁸ Performance art and installation is another discipline that flourished in Belgrade in the early 1970s, first on the premises of the already mentioned SKC.

another cult institution of socialist Yugoslavia, and then, with her fatality, seduced one of the members of the group and formed with him a troupe called Montezuma, with which she toured Europe until the unfortunate death of her new partner.

In fact, the biography of Prodanović's heroine Marceline is a typical biography of a new-wave heroine. Born into the family of a national hero and high political figure as a so-called "child of communism," she became one of the icons of Belgrade's New Wave and the front person of the cult band in the 1980s. Later, when the country plunged into a deep crisis, she emigrated to the West where she achieved notable success as a celebrated art theorist and curator. And her death in Prodanović's novel was also typical of the New Wave generation – she passed away due to a drug overdose. In her life story, one can recognize the elements of the biography of some real figures, such as sisters Mijatović,⁹ Margita Magi Stefanović or even Marina Abramović.

In *The Garden in Venice*, the first half of the 1980s is also underlined as an extension of the creative avant-garde currents of the first half of the twentieth century. First, the names of the heroes of the novels and their composition allude to a connection with avant-garde art. The artistic name of El Lisicki of the storyteller's friend speaks enough for itself, while Marceline is named after Marcel Duchamp, whom her mother once met. Although some of today's poorly-versed readers would first associate the name of the band Zenith FC that appears in the novel with the famous Russian football club, it is, of course, the name of the former avant-garde magazine *Zenit* and a reference to an avant-garde movement led by the Micić brothers who operated in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the 1920s.¹⁰ As the narrator himself says:

⁹ Mira and Maja Mijatović were daughters of former President of the SFRY Presidency Cvijetin Mijatović, and girls very present in the city life of Belgrade in the 1980s. Mira was also a member of the short-lived band VIA Talas. Both died tragically in just a few months during 1991.

¹⁰ It is not unusual for Prodanović to associate his heroes with *Zenit* and Zenitism, an avant-garde movement in the then Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, led by the Micić brothers, who also published the international magazine *Zenit*, first in Zagreb and then in Belgrade. Namely, the beginning of the eighties is a time of rediscovery and reaffirmation of this momentarily forgotten avant-garde movement. Slovenian director Karpo Godina, in 1980, made the feature film *The Jellyfish Raft*, whose heroes are Zenitist artists, and in 1983 two of Zenitism's most prominent scholars, art historian Irina Subotić and literature historian Vidosava Golubović, staged an exhibition "Zenit and the Avant-Garde" at the National Museum in Belgrade. Also, the name El Lisicki was not chosen by chance, since this Russian avant-garde artist was one of the most significant foreign contributors to *Zenit* (see Golubović).

The name of the rock band that flew and shimmered among us for a moment was taken from the art movement, by which the most avant-garde artistic currents of the then world also briefly and violently surrounded my backward, agrarian homeland, just emerging from the then only world war. But it will turn out later, there were some other coincidences: as we know the sun is short at its zenith point, a single instant. Already in the next square of the movie, which is repeated daily, it begins to decline, approaching the sun to the horizon. (Prodanović 57)

Also, the band Zenith FC expressed its connection with the avant-garde heritage by playing music on a collage of texts by avant-garde poets. The verses cited in Prodanović's novel are Vinaver's.¹¹

The existence of an art circle that published the short-lived art fanzine *Ichsilon* and gathered around Professor Gregory Novak, a significant provider of avant-garde art in the European Southeast, also confirms that the narrator and his friends in the novel are heirs to avant-garde heritage in the 1980s. Lina, who is also a member of the editorial board, reveals to the narrator that she owns a tape recording of an unknown Duchamp interview, done with the famous artist by her French mother.

However, the "great season," just like the former Zenitism art movement as we are told in the passage above, was only a brief period in which the creative energy from the beginning of the century was booming again. After a short takeoff, there was a fall again. The age of universal dissolution and decay was coming, the end of the country and the end of rock and roll. The narrator continues to vegetate in a devastated state while Lina goes abroad, affirming herself with the circle of American theorists and art critics. However, even she cannot escape

However, even at the beginning of the new century, when Prodanović publishes his novel, the reaffirmation of Zenitism is not yet complete. We have seen that Tasić's hero abroad has discovered an unknown part of the cultural history of his own country, so one could say that Prodanović also gets involved in his novel. Important events of this discovery of Zenitism in the twenty-first century are the publication of reprints of all issues of the *Zenit* magazine and monograph: *Zenit 1921–1926* by Vidosava Golubović and Irina Subotić in 2008, and the documentary film *Micić's Suitcase* by director Slobodan Simojlović from 2010 is worth mentioning. It is interesting that in this Simojlović's documentary, the activity of Zenithists is associated with a contemporary Belgrade artist. This is the tragically deceased multimedia artist Dragan Ve Ignjatović, to whom the film is dedicated, and who made his artistic name after being modeled on the Zenitist Branko Ve Poljanski, Ljubomir Micić's brother.

¹¹ Stanislav Vinaver (1891–1955) was one of the most important and agile representatives of Serbian avant-garde literature – a poet, critic, polemicist and a very prolific translator.

her own downfall. Her foreign critical work, according to the narrator, is tailored to the commercial demands of the art market, as he witnesses during their last meeting at the Venice Biennale, when her critical discourse orientalizes the work of an artist from the fictitious former communist country of Zuhtenia, while Lina herself, as we have already said, dies from the effects of drug consumption like many stars in the 1980s.

In his novel of two epochs, Prodanović builds the 1980s and 1990s according to the principle of contrast, creativity versus decay, rise against great decline. The author sees the New Wave as a continuation of the creative and rebellious currents of the twenties of the twentieth century and more broadly, both of these avant-garde epochs and the New Wave from the angle of Prodanović are seen as short-lived, but certainly creative, the peaks of existence in the southern Slavic region in the twentieth century.

The narrators as cultural historians

Two other Serbian novels from the same time period, in which, as in Prodanović's *Garden in Venice*, avant-garde currents and avant-garde poetics, as well as the memories from the New Wave age, are given a significant place are Vladimir Pištalo's *Millennium in Belgrade* and Vladimir Tasić's *Rain and Paper*, award by the *NIN* magazine prize. Yet, unlike Prodanović, who focuses only on the past eighties in his novel, which, as we have witnessed, he sees as the revival of the avant-garde and the crisis of the nineties from which he narrates, these two novels tend to cover a much longer time span – primarily the entire twentieth century, but occasionally they go down the time ladder to the mythical beginnings. In the *Millennium*, this is the mythical founding of Belgrade, and in *Rain and Paper* different myths about the creation of the world that originate in the cultures of different nations. The tendency to paint such large time spans is no wonder, since the storytellers of both novels are historians – Milan Djordjević (*Millennium in Belgrade*) is a historian from the Institute of Balkan History and Tanja – the storyteller of *Rain and Paper* – is a former student of art history and a great fan of myths and history, whose alter ego in the novel is the muse of history – Clio.¹²

¹² The storyteller of Prodanović's novel is also an art historian, but as we have already noted, he does not aspire to such wide-ranging interventions as the narrators at *Millennium in Belgrade* and *Rain and Paper*.

The *Millennium in Belgrade* narrator specifically emphasizes, and thus follows, a popular idea of Serbian history and culture as the culture and history of discontinuity, interruptions that exist between the generations of his grandfather, a surrealist painter, his father, a painter, close to the Mediala art group,¹³ a later Parisian resident, and his own New Wave age.

Much like Prodanović's novel, *Millennium in Belgrade* brings the history of a group of Belgrade friends, dating from the golden age of the eighties to the gloomy and war years of the 1990s. The novel begins with Tito's funeral, which, as we have seen, is also seen in the reviews as the moment with which New Wave begins. As in Prodanović's novel, the periods of the eighties and nineties are mutually opposed. In Pištalo, the 1980s were also marked by the era of the explosion of creative energy:

There was never a better time in Belgrade than after the death of Josip Broz Tito ... With a New Wave in our city, a charge of such enthusiasm was released that even the statues were energized. An excited chatter was heard in the streets of Belgrade. Eyes were sparkling. My city is finally mine. This is something from my planet ... I thought Belgrade's New Wave was just that – conquering myself. (14–16)

Like in *The Garden in Venice*, we have a fictional band here, which in *Millennium in Belgrade* bears the name Lizards-Beasts and is led by the storyteller's friend Bana Janović. It is interesting that this musical band also affirms the activity of *Zenit* and avant-garde of the twenties. And Pištalo, writing about that age, could not help mentioning *Jukebox* magazine, which features photographs of Bane and the band, as well as SKC:

One evening in May, 1982, the Lizards-Beasts played in a stocky mansion, formerly called the Officers' Home. That was the building that, seventy-nine years earlier, Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis and his conspirators had left to kill

¹³ Mediala is an art group formed in the fifties in Belgrade, whose members mostly worked in the field of painting. Its most prominent representatives were painters Leonid Šejka, Olja Ivanjicki, Miro Glavurtić, Milovan Vidak, Milić Stanković, Ljuba Popović, Dado Đurić, Vladimir Veličković, Siniša Vuković, Kosta Bradić, Svetozar Samurović, Uroš Tošković. Pištalo is not the only writer in this area who has literary touched this artistic, first of all, painting movement, created in the 1950s in Belgrade and which today enjoys almost mythical status with many. Mirko Kovač's novel *The Crystal Grid* (1995), the last one started by this author in Belgrade, is a good account of the events within this movement.

the Serbian King Aleksandar Obrenović and Queen Draga Mašin. At the place where the members of the “Black Hand” once swore, now the Lizards-Beasts were rocking. (15)

Not only does this passage mention SKC as the cult site of all Belgrade rock bands from the early 1980s, but its author also shows us how the New-Wave spirit changes the city’s topography, how places that associate with the darker parts of the past, such as the murder of a royal couple, are becoming a part of a more beautiful story in the New Way age.

Yet, in his storytelling, Milan Djordjević, a historian, goes beyond his own experience. He tries to relate different artistic and historical epochs in his story, whose inter-threads are interrupted, but together form part of a series with the same place of events, which is Belgrade and gives the example of his family:

After World War II and the Revolution, my grandfather’s world looked to my father as covered in lava as Pompeii. Likewise, my father’s world looked to me. I became a historian out of a desire to clean up the deposits of petrified lava among us and find connections between three generations of people who lived in Belgrade. (Pištalo 99)

Thus, the novel brings us the story of the narrator’s grandfather, Theophilus Djordjević, one of the less important members of the Belgrade Surrealist movement,¹⁴ whose most famous work is the painting *St. George on a Dragon Kills a Horse* and who personally met and corresponded with the “pope of Surrealism” André Breton. Theophilus was a wealthy son who flirted with communism during the interwar period, a so-called “komsalonac,” while working for the Nazis during the German occupation, painting portraits of Hitler. After the war he was forced to emigrate and spend 15 years in London, after which he returned to the country with the permission of the communist authorities.

In addition to the story of his grandfather – the Surrealist, the narrator also gives an account of Bohemian life in postwar Belgrade during the 1950s. Part of that rogue and bohemian life was the story of his father, the painter Andrija Djordjević, who, due to his father’s stay in London and his later disagreement with him, had lived in the city as

¹⁴ In the third and at the beginning of the fourth decade of the twentieth century, there was a very strong Surrealist movement in Belgrade, which had a significant influence on Serbian poetry in the following few decades. As written by Endre Bojtár in his *Literature of the Eastern European Avant-Garde*, “Serbian Surrealism was the strongest center of the ‘original’ French movement in Eastern Europe, given that the Serbs were much closer to Breton’s circle than, for example, the Czechs” (Bojtár 102–103).

a homeless man, but also as an artist close to the Mediala movement, who had dealt with esoteric knowledge and skills with his friends during dogmatic communist times:

My father's friends were collecting wooden "natural sculptures" made by water in the Sava mud. They photographed themselves, costumed with a "timeless grimace." They said that Belgrade was the secret center of the world and that Bethlehem was also Podunk. ... My father and his friends lived in the basements – as rats or early Christians – or in the attics – as angels or pigeons. At a time when journalists were criticized for "pessimism" in the catacombs of communist Belgrade, these members of the underground academy were reading rare books such as *The Secret History of the Mongols*. They themselves wrote their phantom history. Forgery, putting a twist on the world filled them with a sense of power ... Because of the collection of garbage, rare critics that would come down to deal with this group of artists accused them of being "necrophiles of the bourgeois world." (Pištalo 116–117)

After a series of such years spent in Belgrade, during which Andrija Djordjević was not in close relations with his son, he went to Paris and gained great artistic fame there, thus achieving the trajectory that many members of the Mediala movement had. Pištalo weaves his story of Theophilus and Andrija Djordjević from known facts and very often general of places from the milieu of the Belgrade Surrealist Movement and Mediala. Relations with Mediala are also reflected in the mention and quotation in the novel by Leonid Šejka, a prematurely deceased leader, a founder and chief theorist of this artistic group.

As far as the avant-garde is concerned, its closeness to these artistic movements is illustrated by the fact that the title of the last chapter of his novel is partly derived from Miloš Crnjanski's famous poem "Lament over Belgrade" and by the fact that his protagonist reads verses of German expressionist poets during the bombing. However, perhaps the strongest indicator of attachment to the Surrealist heritage is the significant role of sleep that exists in *Millennium in Belgrade*.

Just as there are gaps between these epochs created by major historical events such as World War II, the changes in social order or the collapse of communist views and the penetration of Western values that youth embraces, so there is a gap between the heroes of Pištalo's book, members of three generations of one family; there are also broken ties in their mutual relations. As the narrator of the novel puts it: "I may be malicious, because I have never been close with my father. There was an equal chasm between us as between Andrija and Grandpa Theophilus" (Pištalo 118). However, despite the existence of these gaps between the

heroes, there are also threads that connect them – in addition to the city where they were all born and in which they spend a significant part of their lives, they are joined by similar fates, mostly by emigrant ones. Thus, Theophilus, as a political emigrant, resides in London, Andrija, in his desire for glory, but also for mere existence, goes to Paris, and in the nineties, Milan also faces the dilemma of leaving or staying. Moreover, these three generations of one family are tied by the same artistic aspirations. As one art critic in the novel tells Theophil Djordjević: “What your son does is close to what you Surrealists once did” (Pištalo 104).¹⁵ An indication of these common aspirations is that all three have the same dream of the city, the dream of a kind of utopian Belgrade, which at the level of the novel functions as a leitmotif.

This (im)possible dream, which extends through most of the twentieth century, is narrated by historian Milan Djordjević at the very end of the century in his attempt to connect the whole and preserve it for the future. The moment in which he recounts his story is the apocalyptic era of the 1999 NATO bombing, but also the age of hope brought by the arrival of the new millennium. The new millennium is a possible final calamity or an era of renewal in which, as it is desired in the last sentence of the novel, the dream will also become their home.

The novel *Rain and Paper* by Vladimir Tasić also brings a generational story. However, unlike the Prodanović and Pištalo’s heroes who spent their youth and their happy years in Yugoslavia and Belgrade in the 1980s and in the novels previously analyzed they addressed us from the crisis of the 1990s, Tasić was telling us of young people who left Serbia and the former Yugoslavia in times of crisis and war, to return to their country at the beginning of the new century in the time of transition.¹⁶

¹⁵ It is interesting to note here that “in the interviews, art criticism and theory, the question of the relationship between Surrealism and Mediala was often raised” (Đorić 20). Thus, in the first serious review of the Mediala by Aleksa Čelebonović, the relationship between Surrealism and Mediala is considered (see Čelebonović), while Đordje Kadijević in his interpretations stylistically defines this painting movement as “lyrical Surrealism” (see Kadijević). In his book *Leonid Šejka and Mediala* Srdjan Marković writes the following: “Since the appearance of Mediala and its first expositions, there has been an effort to determine its stylistic affiliation. In this endeavor, the notions of Surrealism and the fantastic are most often suggested” (Marković 51).

¹⁶ After the democratic changes and the fall of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000, Serbia entered the process of transition and privatization of the largest part of social capital. Neoliberal capitalism in the domestic variant very often showed its cruel face, which was reflected in the layoffs of workers in the former socialist giants and the general social uncertainty that affected the majority of the population. The biggest profit was divided between powerful foreign and international companies and a new

The return to the homeland for all three returning heroes (Tanja the narrator of the novel, Georges and Nestor) is quite disappointing. After they left, the cultural milieu changed, and when they came back, there were other values. Hence, Tasić's heroes can only create their own, isolated community with their own culture. A kind of internal emigration that is opposed to the ruling cultural order. In this "mainstream" order, according to Tasić's heroine and narrator Tanja, there is a ruling aesthetics of "gold and boobs." The true nature of the country she returned to, but also of the great world she had been to and which brought to her and her friends a lot of disappointment, was revealed to Tanja when she met a woman whose dog had just been killed. That picture of a puppy that was torn apart by a much larger animal for no reason and whom no one came to help became its real face.

The only place where the heroes of *Rain and paper* feel less exposed is Djura's bookstore, where they gather and tell each other stories. Like the heroes of *Decameron*, the characters in this novel, the outcasts from the outside world, which in Boccaccio are captured by the real and in Tasić by a metaphorical plague, tell each other stories that help them survive.

The small cultural community represented by Tanja and her friends – in addition to Georges and Nestor, there are also the owner of the bookstore Djura (The Irishman) and his girlfriend Sonja – in its stories revives alternative cultural heroes, the avant-garde artists who are known only to the dedicated ones. Tasić's "internal emigrants," the outcasts from the mainstream of the society that headed in the wrong direction, in their internal exile, which is semi-arbitrary and semi-imposed, confront the outside world with an alternative artistic history. The main characters in the stories they tell are avant-garde artists and visionaries – people who were often misunderstood and out of the mainstream in their time, but are also the forerunners of important art movements.

One of their intellectual heroes is Leo Sergejevich Termen (Leon Theremin), one of the insufficiently understood geniuses in his time. A whole chapter of Tasić's novel is devoted to him, and the story of him functions as a story within a story. Termen was a Soviet inventor, one of the fathers of electronic music. His "terpiston," an electronic musical instrument that moves and plays with body movements, is one of the ideals of the hero of Tasić's novel. Although one of the inventors of the

class of turbo-rich people for whom the term "tycoons" was established in most of the South Slavic area.

revolutionary way of making music, Termen will not receive any award for his achievements during his life. His track record will be lost in the mazes of international espionage during the Cold War era, of which he himself was a victim.

Tasić does not forget the artists from our region, and in his novels he tries to affirm a part of Serbia's extreme intellectual and artistic heritage. A little homage to Božidar Knežević was made in *Farewell Gift*, as we saw at the beginning of our paper to Zenitism and the New Wave, as well, while in *Rain and Paper*, an homage to Miroslav Mandić's neo-avant-garde project named *The Rose of Wander* was made, but first it was a novel dedicated to the pioneers of electronic sound in our region. The heroes of *Rain and Paper* are rediscovering the fact that today, in a wider circle, has been completely forgotten that Radio Belgrade's studio was one of the first places in the world where electronic sound began. "Everybody here knows why Birčanin screwed a Turk, and nobody knows anything about these pioneers of electronic music" (Tasić *Kiša* 169).

The novel pays tribute to Vladan Radovanović,¹⁷ but above all Mitar Reks Subotić-Suba, a pioneer of electronic music in Serbia, a musician born in Novi Sad, who made a significant music and production career in Brazil. On the domestic scene, Subotić produced some of the cult albums of Yugoslav rock and roll in the 1980s, such as *Bolero* by Haustor, *Par godina za nas* by Ekatarina Velika, and the only album by La strada. However, in our area, Subotić is probably best known for his project and album *Angel's Breath* (1994), which he recorded with Milan Mladenović, one of the key New Wave figures in the entire former Yugoslavia.

Upon leaving for Brazil, Subotić successfully combined the rhythms of his native area with the rhythms of samba and gained wider popularity and cult status. Like his life, also the death of this cultural hero was mythic according to Tasić's characters. Since Subotić lost his life, according to the interpretation of the hero of the novel, and sacrificed himself for his art, by returning to the burning studio to save his recordings.

In telling these stories, the heroes of *Rain and Paper* represent a range of ideas and viewpoints that can be labeled avant-garde. According to Tanja and her friends, Reks Subotić is the creator of the rhythm that the heroes of our novel are looking for. This rhythm calls for dance and becomes the language of universal communication between people.

¹⁷ It is also worth mentioning that this multimedia neo-avant-garde artist was also a member of Mediala for a short period of time. On the attitude of Vladan Radovanović towards Mediala and his abandonment of the movement see Marković 30–33.

The cosmopolitanism that Tasić's heroes long for is a reflection of the avant-garde ideas that Tasić seeks to affirm.¹⁸ With his novel, Tasić builds on the legacy of the Serbian avant-garde and offers us a modernized version of Sumatraism. His outcasts from society seek the language of universal communication and advocate the thesis of universal connection in the world, which was the basic idea of this avant-garde movement created by Miloš Crnjanski.¹⁹

The thesis of Crnjanski and other great artists of the historical avant-garde on universal connection and brotherhood among people is now proven by means of modern science:

I read somewhere, in a dentist or gynecologist's waiting room, in an article beginning with the words: scientists proved that seventy-three or seventy-four thousand years ago, an eruption of such magnitude occurred on the site of present-day Sumatra that there was no sun, no summer, no spring, not even in the fall; a volcanic winter with half-darkness prevailed, in which no plant could perform photosynthesis; there were about a thousand people left in the world at the time. A thousand people, no more. A fantastic discovery. Thousands of people from whom we all originate, all our precious material, all our noses, all our eyes, all our skin colors, our skulls, all our feet, all our ears, all our tongues and all our gods, our stories, the myths by which we are supposedly different. We all arrived from that unpaved village. It can be packed into twenty buses, one street, one train carrying us somewhere, like children on a field trip, through the night, clapping in a strange but familiar rhythm, as an encrypted message, scrambled and scattered in the most likely places, and only occasionally flashes where no one would ever ask for it, where no one else asks for it, in the poetry of Miloš Crnjanski, in a song of a sailor from an American novel about British geodesy engineers:

Sumatra, Sumatra,
Where all the women are
Like Cleopatra. (Tasić, *Kiša* 20–21)²⁰

¹⁸ According to Guillermo de Tore, internationalism together with anti-traditionalism constitute the two basic postulates of all avant-garde movements (12).

¹⁹ Much has been written about Sumatraism, personal avant-garde movement of Miloš Crnjanski, the most important person of the Serbian avant-garde and, along with Ivo Andrić, the greatest Serbian writer of the twentieth century, the Sumatra poem, and the program text "Sumatra Explanation" in the Serbian and the entire South Slavic area, but it could still be said that a good deal of these interpretations can be seen as "the cosmic principle of the universal irrational connection – the basis of Sumatraism" (Lončar 111).

²⁰ In his novel, Tasić alludes to the catastrophic eruption of the Toba volcano in Sumatra, which "some scientists consider to be the greatest catastrophe the human race has ever suffered" (cited by Briker, Ibitson 15), which has led to a catastrophic demographic decline while others stand on the view that Toba's influence is exagger-

This passage even ends with a paraphrase of the emblematic poem of Serbian avant-garde “Sumatra” by Miloš Crnjanski. An homage to Japan as a land of rain on its pages connects Tasić’s book with Crnjanski.

In addition to the connection and brotherhood among the people, Tasić’s novel affirms the idea of going back to the beginning. In the time of complicated communication, computer palimpsests, and congestion with all sorts of information that actually pollute the communication channel much more than expanding it, Tasić’s heroes turn to the oldest means of communication, body language and movement, a dance common to all humans and revealing their longing for the time when the world was tailor made to man and all dimensions and distances were measured exactly by the dimensions of his body.

In these aspirations from Tasić’s novel, we again recognize some of the avant-garde topics. Well-known is the avant-garde “rediscovery of the fullness of the original language, the restoration of art through the freshness of uncivilized vision, the rejection of culture, the escape to exotics and the return to a previous, undistorted state of social development” (Marino 162).

As the heroes of *Rain and Paper*, with their stories, identify themselves retroactively with all the acts of non-conformism, rebellion and innovation in the arts, their logical consequence is their recourse to alternative artistic practices. The pursuit of stories about artists and visionaries was a kind of construction of their own tradition of which the heroes of the novel are also a part. At the end of the novel, this intellectually exiled troupe has a performance aimed at protesting against the demolition of abandoned warehouses where the homeless gathered and dogs and cats walk around, and where a new shopping mall will most probably be built after the demolition.

The aforementioned dance performance becomes the pinnacle of the hero’s intellectual resistance and the cathartic moment of the novel. Yet this pre-conceived action also becomes the end of this intellectual and artistic group. The performance attracts considerable attention of the people gathered on the river bank, who are watching with care the boat in which Tanja and her friends are performing. However, one of them is the manager of a multinational company that sponsors an “alternative” music festival that just ended at the fortress in Novi Sad. The manager of *Pepsi* company offers the patronage to our artists to which most members agree. Unable to resist the money call, they sacrifice their alternativeness and avant-garde. In this way, they become a kind of controlled or fraudulent alternative sponsored by major flows

ated (Briker and Ibitson 15).

of world capital. This is also one way in which capital appropriates alternative cult and avant-garde art and introduces it into its wing. The only one who does not agree to this sales relationship is the storyteller – Tanja. She leaves a record of this group's alternative art work, which is a kind of "porcelain solace." All she has to do is to bear witness to this alternative and counter-cultural activity in this area and in her city.

All three novels that we have dealt with in our paper are generational stories, a sort of balancing one circle of friends. It is not surprising, therefore, that they find so much space for rock and roll, since, when it comes to the aforementioned writers, it is one of the main themes of their generation and their youth. This is why we encounter nostalgia in these novels.²¹ These literary memories of the 1980s in the former state are certainly colored by it. We find nostalgia in the texts we analyzed, both in the quotation of the 1980s and the Koprokofiev group from *Farewell Gift* at the beginning of our text, and in the Pištalo's *Millennium in Belgrade*, in which, as we saw, the New Wave period is perceived as an era where the main character and his friends are finally in agreement with themselves. Feeling nostalgic is of particular importance at the Prodanović's *Garden in Venice*, where the memory of the 1980s is at the same time the memory of rock and roll and the former fatal love, and between them in this realization is a sign of equality. So we are dealing with these aforementioned prose pieces with both personal and generational nostalgia. The nostalgia and the image of the New Wave in these several aforementioned achievements are in line with the notion of this age that we often have today in the media, publications and that is most often nurtured by former actors and observers of the early 1980s, talking about the New Wave as a golden age, but also the swan song of Yugoslav socialism.²²

However, these novels are not only about the personal and generational nostalgia of ex-New Wavers. In the novels we analyzed we also

²¹ Slovenian professor for cultural studies Mitja Velikonja, in his study *Titostalgia*, defines nostalgia "as a complex, differentiated and changeable, emotionally charged, personal or collective, (un)instrumentalized story that glorifies romanticized lost times, people, objects, feelings, smells, events, spaces, relations, values, political and other systems in a binary way and at the same time – in sharp contrast to the less important present – regrets their loss" (Velikonja 31).

²² Such a picture is brought, among other things, by the famous Croatian documentary film *Happy Child* (2003) by Igor Mirković about the New Wave age (see Mirković).

found a kind of cultural nostalgia. Telling their stories from the time of deep crisis after the disintegration of the former state and the end of socialism, after which Serbia reached the distant world periphery, the narrators of Podanović's and Pištalo's novels go back to the avant-garde era as a period when these Serbian and South Slavic territories were neck to neck with the developed world. As we saw for the storyteller of *The Garden in Venice*, the avant-garde era was a period when his backward agrarian state briefly caught up with the world, and the hero of Pištalo's novel had a similar message, reminding us of the era when his grandfather corresponded with Breton. Tasić's narrator from *Farewell Gift* also reminds us of the fact that at one point we were keeping up with Europe, by discovering Zenitism in a large European museum in an excerpt from the beginning of this paper.

It is interesting that the very participants of the avant-garde events on our soil emphasized this simultaneity with the European trends. As an illustration, we can use the words of Miloš Crnjanski from a letter sent to the publisher Svetislav Cvijanović in 1922: "There is nothing new here, except that we read Belgrade newspapers at the same time when Viennese ones; they arrive simultaneously. It seems to me that we are in a new Brittany" (quoted according to Tešić 11).²³

The desire to highlight this internationalism and going step by step with Europe could also have been one of the motives for all the writers we dealt with to remember Zenitism in their works. It was this movement and the *Zenit* magazine, with its wide range of international associates and reputation that it enjoyed across the European continent²⁴

²³ This view of the avant-garde currents in our region, as expressed in the analyzed novels, is in good part in line with what is represented by official Serbian literary historiography. We need not go beyond Jovan Deretić's famous *History of Serbian Literature* to come to such a view. Starting with a chapter on Serbian avant-garde literature, Deretić says: "Our literature is renewed in the international spiritual climate of anti-war sentiment, defeatism and the general crisis of traditional values of civil society. *It undergoes the same processes as in other literatures, even in those on which it has traditionally depended ... All basic movements and trends had an international character, all of them developing in close connection with literary events in Europe and in other countries of the world*" (1021; italics by M. A.).

²⁴ The extensive biobibliography of mostly international associates of *Zenit*, admirers of Zenitism and correspondents of the Micić brothers, written by Vida Golubović and Irina Subotić, also contains the most important names of European (avant-garde) literature and art such as Maxim Gorky, Georg Gross, Walter Gropius, Ilya Ehrenburg, Max Jacob, Sergei Yesenin, Vasily Kandinsky, the already mentioned El Lisicki, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kazimir Malevich, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Rodchenko, Jaroslav Seifert, Karel Teige, Vladimir Tatlin, Guillermo de Torre,

on the one hand, and some of the autonomy and authenticity comparing to other avant-garde movements that originated from other places²⁵ but were also present here on the other, could have acted as a desired affirmation of our area in the developed world.

This cultural nostalgia, as we called it, does not stop only at the avant-garde period. For example, a new wave breaks through similar optics in Prodanović's novel. And the period from the beginning of the eighties is seen in *The Garden in Venice* as a period in which our former country was at least culturally part of the developed world.

Interestingly, participants in the New Wave events, like avant-garde artists previously, liked to emphasize their closeness to the world of music. Thus, Dušan Kojić Koja, one of the most prominent actors of the Yugoslav New Wave, and a member of the bands Šarlo akrobata and Disciplina kičme, in the documentary on the New Wave, produced within the series *Department store* dedicated to Yugoslav pop culture, points out that in the era of the New Wave we were late comparing to the world, but only a year, a year and a half late, which was negligible as in the period before that (See *Robna kuća: Novi talas 1*).²⁶

In the approaches to past epochs that we encounter in the texts we analyzed earlier, we can recognize the creation of a nostalgia-characteristic "retrospective utopia," which according to Velikonja is "marked by two opposing elements: beautiful memories of idealized yesterday compared to inferior today, and bitterness because these pastoral *tempi felici* have passed irrevocably" (Velikonja 32). Nostalgia in the mentioned novels can also be interpreted as a part of the frequent presence of this phenomenon in postsocialist societies. These societies are "with all their dilemmas and solutions, fractures and cruelties, extremely suitable for the birth of nostalgia" (Velikonja 40). However, in the novels in front of us, we do not encounter, or mostly do not encounter, nostalgia for socialism, as it is common in today's postsocialist countries,

Velimir Hlebnikov, Marc Chagall, Chagall Kurgal (see Subotić, Golubović 289–395).

²⁵ Thus, in Mecler's *Lexicon of Avant-Garde*, originally published in German in 2009, under the term "Zenitism." it is stated that this movement, although the derived character of its poetic theory and poetic practice is also mentioned, was "a specific Serbian current within the avant-garde, primarily related to Ljubomir Micić" (Zigel 333)

²⁶ This view was also accepted by the chroniclers of the New Wave, who most often themselves, more or less, were participants in the New Wave events. Thus, Ivan Ivačković points out that "the echo of punk and the New Wave quickly reached Yugoslavia and was enormous" (239). According to this author, "at the time of the New Wave, Belgrade – to paraphrase one of the slogans of the 1990s demonstrations – was the world. Not only were its eyes, like those of Zagreb, turned to the western capitals, but those capitals also showed reciprocal interest" (Ivačković 243).

but nostalgia for periods, such as the interwar avant-garde and New Wave, when according to certain views and opinions (adopted by some of the narrators of our novels), these South Slavic areas were mostly part of Europe and the world – that very Europe and the world, which a good part of people from the former Yugoslavia and other Eastern and Central European areas thought they would immediately become an equal part of after the fall of communism.

Nevertheless, unlike the nostalgic creation of “retrospective utopias,” which in our view is a passive and conciliatory attitude towards the unfavorable present, an escape from it into the nostalgic past, in the narratives we dealt with, we encounter also an active component – the component of resistance. In all three novels the stories of the avant-garde and the New Wave function as a kind of, to use the terminology of Jan Assmann, counter-present or counterfactual memory.²⁷ Such a memory often arises as a resistance to an unfavorable present moment. Thus, in the case of the novels *The Garden in Venice* and *Millennium in Belgrade*, memory emerges as a resistance to the crisis of the 1990s, from which the narrators of these two novels turn to us. The narrator of Prodanović’s novel activates the memory of the eighties and indirectly through them of the avant-garde as a certainly better period, while the historian Milan Djordjević in the *Millennium* recalls an entire arc of artistic activity in Belgrade that goes from the avant-garde, through Mediala to the New Wave.

In the novel *Rain and Paper*, which is, unlike previous works, largely free of both nostalgia and already widely held views when considering the interwar era and the 1980s, this memory function that functions as resistance to the present is even more pronounced. Only Tasić’s narrator, by virtue of her artistic counter-history, is not opposed to the era of the 1990s, but to the current transition moment at the local level and the corporate-capitalist moment at the global one.

Although largely focused on artistic practices in her own country, Tanja’s alternative artistic history transcends Serbian and Yugoslav frameworks and extends from the Sumatranism of Miloš Crnjanski, through the electronic music of Leo Termen, Vladan Radovanović, the neo-avant-garde *Rose of Wonder* by Miroslav Mandić, to the opus of the Serbian-Brazilian musician Mitar Subotić Suba. Hence Tasić’s understanding of avant-garde art is more complex than in the case of Pištalo and Prodanović. His point of view has evolved from a memory colored by the personal and cultural nostalgia he exhibited in these

²⁷ For more on counter-memory, see Assmann 79–88.

epochs in *Farewell Gift* to the memory of the avant-garde as resistance in *Rain and Paper*. In this novel, the history of avant-garde art stands against the omnipresent commercialization and the rule of capital today. Hence Tasić's novel has a broader significance in relation to the texts of Prodanović and Pištalo; it is an attempt to literary reflect on epochal issues.

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Spomin na avantgardo in novi val v sodobnem srbskem romanu

Ključne besede: srbska književnost / sodobni srbski roman / literarna avantgarda / novi val / zenitizam / *rock and roll* / Pištalo, Vladimir / Prodanović, Mileta / Tasić, Vladimir

Razprava obravnava dve pretekli obdobji 20. stoletja v nekaj reprezentativnih srbskih romanih ob prelomu 20. stoletja v 21. To so osemdeseta leta in obdobje novega vala v Jugoslaviji, se pravi obdobje, ki je bližje preteklosti, a o katerem je še vedno mogoče pisati z vidika neposredne priče, in obdobje avantgarde, se pravi obdobje med obema svetovnjima vojnama, ki je v umetnosti zaznamovano z različnimi gibanji zgodovinske avantgarde. Interpretirani so *Milenij v Beogradu* (2000) Vladimirja Pištala, *Vrt v Benetkah* (2002) Milete Prodanovića ter *Dež in papir* (2004) Vladimirja Tasića. V teh romanih je še posebej opazno, da sta omenjeni obdobji najpogosteje povezani kot del istih ustvarjalnih in intelektualnih tokov v 20. stoletju.

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