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## When the Margin Cries: Surrealism in Yugoslavia

**T**HE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL REDEFINING of the notions of the center and the margin accelerated rediscovery of “minor” cultures. The study of their import and influences, however, remains largely focused upon the post-Second World War period. Yet, it was precisely modernist apprehensiveness of fixed structures that initiated a subversion of these geo-cultural categories. Nowhere was the urge to restructure geopolitical hierarchies felt more powerfully than in the avant-garde. The geographic effect of this principle was an emphatic internationalization of the avant-garde activity and the establishment of multifaceted relations between the avant-garde “centers” (Paris, Berlin, New York, Moscow) and their counterparts in the cultural “periphery” (Buenos Aires, Athens, Bucharest, Cairo). These unique cross-cultural dialogues fermented in surrealism. Even though Paris served as an indisputable (if self-assigned) center, this site of desire was, quite “surrealistically”, infused and indeed formed by the periphery. We have discovered many *loci* of the “centripetal” surrealist forces and the literature on, for instance, Brazilian, German, or even Egyptian surrealism abounds. Yet, one surrealist grouping seems to have escaped the record: apart from a brief mentioning in several most comprehensive books, the Yugoslav surrealists have hardly received any critical attention outside their own country<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the Belgrade

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Nadeau’s classical *Histoire du surréalisme suivie de documents surréalistes* (Nadeau 1945) mentions the Belgrade Circle only parenthetically. Gérard Durozoi’s *Le surréalisme* (2002), even though criticizing Nadeau’s book for failing to account for the global spread of the movement, does not escort much more attention to the Serbian

Surrealist Circle was arguably one of the most vibrant early-surrealist strongholds in Europe. Active from 1922-1932, the surrealist movement in Yugoslavia yielded a generation of excellent poets, numerous collective and individual art-works/artifacts (*le cadavre exquis*, collages, assemblages, and photographs), unusual theoretical works, and the post/high-surrealist art (cf. Milena Pavlović-Barili and Stane Kregar). The critical neglect may be explained by factors such as linguistic barriers, scant interpretative body, and the belated and frequently romanticized assessment of the Central- and East-European avant-garde in general. One important reason why the Belgrade group has remained virtually unknown in the international context lies in the premature termination of its activities. Forced by internal disputes and governmental repression, surrealism in Yugoslavia ceased to exist in the

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surrealists. René Passeron's *Encyclopédie du Surréalisme* (1975) lists some of Belgrade surrealists but unfortunately provides some factual mistakes regarding their artistic contributions. The critical assessment of Serbian Surrealism in the Anglophone world is almost non-existent, the only exception being the insightful, if brief, account of the Belgrade surrealists' artistic achievements in the two recently published accompaniments of the Central European Avant-garde exhibition by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, curated by Timothy Benson: *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (2002) and *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-gardes, 1910-1930* (2002). The French-speaking audience is in a slightly better position – it may get acquainted with the activities of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle in three hard-to-find books, Hanifa Kapidžić-Osmanagić, *Le Surréalisme serbe et ses rapports avec le surréalisme français* (1968), Dušan Matić, *André Breton oblique* (1977), Branko Aleksić, *Dalí: Inédits de Belgrade (1932)* (1987) and «Le Sphinx de l'humour noir soumis à la question à Belgrade en 1932» (1988). Marko Ristić and Dušan Matić recorded their memories of Breton in: Marko Ristić, «La nuit du tournesol» and Dušan Matić, «Un chef d'orchestre» (1967). An entry on Serbian Surrealism in German and respective entries on Dušan Matić and Marko Ristić (all authored by Branko Aleksić) have appeared in: *Europa, Europa, Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, band. 1-4, eds. Ryszard Stanislawski and Christoph Brockhaus (1994). There is, however, a whole plethora of publications on Serbian surrealism in the countries of former Yugoslavia. Of these, I would like to single out Milenka Todić's *Nemoguće* ("The Impossible") (2002) which was fortunately published as a trilingual edition. Other important critical assessments exist only Serbo-Croatian: Radovan Vučković's *Srpska avangardna proza* ("Serbian Avant-garde Prose") (2000), Jelena Novaković's comparative study of the Serbian and French surrealism *Na rubu halucinacija* ("On the Edge of Hallucinations") (1996), Jovan Delić's *Srpski nadrealizam i roman* ("Serbian Surrealism and the Novel") (1980), Miodrag B. Protić's report on the Yugoslav surrealist art «Srpski nadrealizam, 1929-1932» ("Serbian Surrealism, 1929-1932") in *Nadrealizam, socijalna umetnost, 1929-1950* ("Surrealism, a Social Art, 1929-1950") (1969), and so on. The recently published collection of texts and documents by and about the Belgrade surrealists (Marko Ristić, *Oko nadrealizma I* ["Around Surrealism I"], 2003) presents an invaluable resource for future researchers.

form of collective action already at the beginning of 1933. Despite the fact that the individual work of several Belgrade surrealists continued until 1938, the early dissipation made impossible any presentation of the group at the subsequent surrealist exhibitions. The Belgrade surrealists' early and original «pursuit of the marvelous» and their intense collaboration with the Paris center call for a comprehensive research which this essay can only partly embody. The following account does not aim to be exhaustive; rather, it delineates the Circle's prolific collective activities and its relationship with the Paris in several strokes, drawing the report which – the author hopes – may incite further international research. Yet, while calling the critical attention to this neglected branch of the most cosmopolitan avant-garde movement, the ambitions of this essay grow large: to unearth what may prove to be one of the best kept secrets of surrealism means to bring about not only the reframing of surrealism as we know it, but also the re-apprehension of the modernist avant-garde in general. The corollary reframing of the dynamic of the center and the margin is as much needed in the present day geopolitical space as it was (and felt so) in the years of the surrealist uproar.

In spite of its provocative nature, surrealism in France developed as a more or less foreseeable expression of the evolution of French literature hitherto, in particular in its post-Lautréamont period. By contrast, in then young political entity of the South Slavs, surrealism appeared as a movement severed from the area's natural literary development. Almost accustomed to their lagging behind the artistic trends, the Yugoslav cultures lacked an interior refractive point against and through which it an avant-garde movement may be developed<sup>2</sup>. Serbian Surrealism was also curiously unanchored in DADA-activities of the only preceding avant-garde grouping in the region, the zenitists<sup>3</sup>. The localization of activity to the southeastern parts of the country was another particularity of Yugoslav surrealism. As remarked by Vučković and Kapidžić-Osmanagić, this «surrealist siting» may be explained

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<sup>2</sup> In their *Anti-Wall* manifesto the surrealists Vane Bor and Marko Ristić emphasize the idiosyncrasy of the South Slavic literary space, claiming that surrealism as expression of the crisis of poetry could not have evolved naturally from domestic literature, for «that literature itself had not had autochthonous development» (Bor and Ristić 1932: p. 26).

<sup>3</sup> The Belgrade Surrealists showed very little understanding for the endeavors of «zenitists», the Yugoslav dadaists rallied around the magazine *Zenit*, published in Zagreb. In his assessment of the origins of Serbian Surrealism, Vučković explains the movement's independence from the domestic DADA project by the dynamic of foreign influences (Vučković 2000: p. 218-219).

convincingly by the dynamic of foreign influences. These had caused profound cultural variances in this ethnically compact region and importantly fashioned its modernist awakening: whereas the impact of the long and intimate contact with German culture was felt in the northwestern parts of the region (expressionism and dadaism in Slovenia and Croatia), the strong cultural and diplomatic links between France and Serbia in the nineteenth century made French art and philosophy a shaping force of the Serbian intellectual scene. Thus, it may be considered natural that a *French* movement would influence the young Serbian intelligentsia. Yet, the choice of the movement to disquiet what was just articulating itself as a new political entity (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later Yugoslavia) was, one may argue, a matter of (un)conscious preference and specific historical constellation. In other words, the moment and the place were ripe for surrealism.

More than any other avant-garde movement, surrealism installed a vigorous crossing of boundaries – psychological, artistic, cultural, and geopolitical. Thus its geographical spread was in fact a consequence of its multi-leveled problematization of borders. The branching, however, came with a delay: most groups outside France were active only from the beginning of the 1930s. The Yugoslav surrealist movement's contemporaneity with the activity in *la Centrale* comes as a surprise: the surrealist epoch in Serbian arts and literature lasted from 1922 to 1932 (individual works until 1938) and was thus coterminous with the early development of the movement in Paris<sup>4</sup>. Nurtured by the same intellectual climate and similar educational setting as their French

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<sup>4</sup> One may provisionally divide the activity of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle into three periods, the proto-surrealism (1922-1924), the early surrealism (1924-1926), and "mature" period (1926 to 1932), only the last marked by collective public action. The division proposed here, alike all other classifications, is, of course, conditional and based upon the amount of importance escorted to certain artifacts or literary works. Herein the author sees the beginning of proto-surrealism as embodied in the "surrealist" turn of the new series of *Putevi*. The appearance of Ristić's article on surrealism and his translation of Breton's first Manifesto in *Svedočanstva* ("Testimonies") designate the beginning of early surrealist period. The 1926 publication of the major literary-visual monument of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle, Milan Dedinac's long poem *Javna ptica* ("Public Bird") (in progress 1922-1926), and Ristić's critical response announce the commencement of mature period. It should be noted that I date the commencement of the collective surrealist activity in the Belgrade Circle earlier than their first group declaration was officially published in the *Politika* on 14 April 1930. The cessation of the activity of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle, on the other hand, is dated here by the imprisonment of several Yugoslav surrealists at the end of 1932 and the dissipation of the group in the following months.

counterparts, the Belgrade surrealists-to-be spent extensive periods in Paris in the late 1910s and the early 1920s, most of them studying at different French universities and enthusiastically participating in the Parisian artistic and literary life<sup>5</sup>. Indeed it may be argued that French avant-garde culture *en general* – rather than the French Surrealist movement exclusively – was the conceptual framework for Surrealism in Yugoslavia<sup>6</sup>. Thus it happened that the Belgrade-based literary journal called *Putevi* (“Ways”) around whose “new series” these like-minded people coalesced, artistically and editorially emulated the avant-garde series of *Littérature*. From 1921 to 1924 *Putevi* filled its pages with Matić’s articles on psychoanalysis, André Breton’s proto-surrealist essays («Lâchez tout», «Clairement», «Entrée des mediums», and «Les mots sans rides»), and the experimental poetry by a rapidly forming domestic surrealist group. The year 1923 may be provisionally taken as the beginning of tangible cooperation between the French and Yugoslav surrealists. In this year Ristić and Breton commenced their long-lasting correspondence which would be marked by both intellectual kinship and profound misunderstanding<sup>7</sup>.

The date October 15, 1924 witnessed the bombastic appearance of the First Manifesto of Surrealism, promulgating «*l’automatisme psychique pur*», supremacy of free association, dreams, and disinterested play of thought, which, its author claimed, could solve the fundamental problems of social and individual life<sup>8</sup>. In Belgrade, «Breton and surrealism [...] were present from the very beginning» (Matić 1978: p. 9). The last, issue of *Putevi* (Autumn, 1924) was already completely under the «surrealist spell»; it featured Matić’s important article «Bitka oko zida» (“Battle about a Wall”) in which he espoused the «surreality» of dreams and argued for artistic attendance to the levels of consciousness neglected heretofore.

The turning-point for the French surrealists was the foundation of their own venue – *La Révolution surréaliste*. It is less known, however, that, by that time, the Yugoslav surrealists had already published the first issue of their own «surrealist journal» – the limited-series project

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<sup>5</sup> Marko Ristić, was, for instance, a regular subscriber to a number of French literary journals (*Littérature*, *Les feuilles libres*, *Les marges*, and others) from as early as 1919 (Todić 2002: p. 163).

<sup>6</sup> A similar view was advanced by Todić 2002: p. 164 *et passim*.

<sup>7</sup> In 1923 Ristić sent Breton his translations of the latter’s essays published in *Putevi*. Breton responded with a gift of a copy of his *Clair de Terre*. The two surrealist leaders met for the first time in December 1926.

<sup>8</sup> The first and other manifestoes may be found in Breton 2000.

named *Svedočanstva* (“Testimonies”)<sup>9</sup>. Ristić’s article «Surrealism», published in *Svedočanstva*, n. 1 (21 Nov. 1924), is usually taken as the official starting point of Yugoslav surrealism. This issue also included the translation of Breton’s first Manifesto and the news about the founding of the Bureau of Surrealist Research, which, curiously, was publicized in Belgrade ten days before the rest of the world was able to read it in the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (1 Dec 1924). In turn, the French journal features a recommendation for *Svedočanstva* and various articles by Marko Ristić. *Svedočanstva* played a decisive role in shaping the Serbian movement, articulating its positions vis-à-vis the Paris center and initiating the cooperative exchange<sup>10</sup>. The Serbian surrealists were interested in the subjects such as the nature of poetic creation, madness, or artistic responsibility. Understanding their work as an ethical act at odds with the political organization of their country (monarchical dictatorship), the Belgrade group developed a socio-critical orientation which was to be its distinctive trait. The Yugoslav surrealist poetry, automatic writings, and programmatic texts professed the beauty of the ephemeral, the urban, and the oneiric; they cultivated folkloric expression, yet they advanced cosmopolitanism<sup>11</sup>.

The collaboration between the French and Serbian surrealists intensified in the period 1924-1926. In addition to artistic projects in their own country, de Bouilly, Vučo, Ristić and Matić actively participated in and contributed to the cultural and political engagements of the Paris group. The major levers of this cooperation were the poets and artists Matić and de Bouilly. Whereas Matić, as the philosophy scholar, was instrumental in spreading and explicating the theoretical position of surrealism, de Bouilly’s role was more practical: always “on the road” between Paris and Belgrade, he served as a physical link between the two groups, presenting the Yugoslav avant-garde magazines and artifacts to the French surrealists. Both Matić and Bouilly were among the signatories of the surrealist declaration *La*

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<sup>9</sup> The journal *Svedočanstva* was thought out as a limited series of testimonies of its time. Eight issues appeared in ten-day circles, each treating a different topic emblematic of the current intellectual climate. The journal was distributed to all major Yugoslav cities, as well as to Paris and Frankfurt. The first issue of *Svedočanstva* appeared on November 21, 1924, and the project ended in March 1925.

<sup>10</sup> *Svedočanstva* featured numerous contributions by French surrealists. In turn, the picture-novel *Vampir* signed by F. N., an inmate of the Belgrade asylum (*Svedočanstva*, n. 6, 21 Jan. 1925), was republished in *La Révolution surréaliste* n. 5 (15 Oct. 1925).

<sup>11</sup> A poetic text by Ristić, published in *Svedočanstva* n. 3, is considered the first example of automatic writing in Serbo-Croatian.

*Révolution d'abord et toujours* (1925). This famous statement on the fusion of art and revolution was, in fact, a well-suited platform for the Belgrade surrealists who had already enthusiastically associated the surrealist “insurrection” with the October revolution in the “panslavic” issue of *Svedočanstva* (1 Dec. 1924). Formulating their specific avant-garde position against the backdrop of a repressive political environment and cultural/political censorship, the Belgrade surrealists probably felt this call more imminently and even more genuinely than their French counterparts, the fact to which I will return hereafter.

De Bouilly and Risto Ratković’s fanzine *Večnost* (“Eternity”) and the separate publication of Milan Dedinac’s long poem *Javna ptica* (“The Public Bird”) powerfully affirmed the presence of surrealism on Yugoslav soil in 1926. Juxtaposing the surrealistically generated poetic imagery and hallucinatory photographs and photograms, *Javna ptica* inaugurated multimedia-creation in Yugoslav literature. With Dedinac’s poem, the Belgrade group got the poetical achievement worth of and suitable for manifesto-writing. Thus Ristić writes his review of *Javna ptica* in the form of a surrealist manifesto (Jan. 1927), praising the poem as a «dialectic evolution of irrational thought» which crusades against the hypocrisy and pragmatism of bourgeois society (Ristić 1964: p. 80). The same year Ristić published his own poetic/manifesto-like novel entitled *Bez mere* (“Without a Measure”), written alternatively in Paris and Belgrade and contemporaneously to Breton’s *Nadja*. The two works have such close formal and theoretical resemblances that a certain exchange of influences seems indisputable. Yet, the manifesto-like portions of Ristić’s novel concern what had increasingly been the subject of interest in the Belgrade Surrealist Circle, namely, the ethics of «surrealist revolution». The further public elaboration of this issue, pressing though it was, would have to wait for another three years. The period 1927-1930 was replete with individual and collaborative projects, yet poor in publicizing the activity of the group.

The year 1930, however, saw also the appearance of the group’s first joint declaration (*Politika* 14 Apr. 1930), promptly followed by the bilingual almanac *Nemoguće/L’Impossible*, a «model avant-garde multimedia work which move[d] the set boundaries of not only belle-lettres, but also fine arts» (Todić 2002: p. 169). In the introductory declaration, the survey «Čeljust dijalektike» (“The Jaws of Dialectics”), and several programmatic texts, the Belgrade surrealists clarify their ideological and artistic position and postulate the permanent self-critique as the modus in which their «pursuit of the marvelous» should

proceed<sup>12</sup>. That the artistic dialogicity was an important aspect of this project was made vivid. *Nemoguće/L'Impossible* celebrates parallelism and congruence of the activities of the French and Serbian groups from its graphic design to its contents to the circulation set-up<sup>13</sup>. The languages alternate as literary and artistic contributions of the French and Serbian surrealists interact: alongside Matić's exquisite poem «Mutan lov u bistroj vodi» ("Murky Fishing in Clear Waters") (subsequently translated into French and published in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* n. 6, May 1933), one may see a number of French poems which appeared for the first time in print in *Nemoguće/L'Impossible* (poems by René Char and André Thirion, a prose poem by Benjamin Péret, Breton's series of five «Poèmes», later titled and published in his *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*, 1932, etc.).

With its A-4 cover strikingly printed in pink and black and the asymmetrical graphic make-up that emphasized visual discontinuity, *Nemoguće/L'Impossible* testified to another prominent set of artistic interests in the Belgrade Surrealist Circle. In addition to poetic activities, the Belgrade Surrealists dedicated themselves to an enthusiastic production of art-works and artifacts: drawings, photographs, photograms, collages, and assemblages<sup>14</sup>. These coded agents of the unconscious served them to unravel the marvelous in the incidental and juxtapose different existential and historical rhythms in a work of art. The vibrant artistic activity of these years was presented

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<sup>12</sup> The declaration was signed by the following names: Aleksandar Vučo, Oskar Davičo, Milan Dedinac, Mladen Dimitrijević, Vane Živadinović Bor, Živanović-Noe, Đorđe Jovanović, Đorđe Kostić, Dušan Matić, Branko Milovanović, Koča Popović, Petar Popović and Marko Ristić. The declaration was reproduced in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* n. 1 (July 1930) and was accompanied by the information on the almanac and its contents.

<sup>13</sup> The circulation belonged to the French-Serbian Bookstore of A. M. Popović in Belgrade and Librairie José Corti in Paris.

<sup>14</sup> The plethora of the Serbian surrealist artifacts re-emerged in a comprehensive retrospective exhibition *Nemoguće, umetnost nadrealizma* ("The Impossible, surrealist art") held at the Belgrade Museum of Applied Arts, November 2002-February 2003. These included the assemblage «Urnebesni kliker» ("The Frenzied Marble"), numerous «objective chance» collages such as «Une atmosphère du printemps et de jeunesse,» montage-based posters, *le cadavre exquis*, photographs exhibiting the mundane life of the city suddenly endowed with meaning, Nikola Vučo's photographic experiments and Vane Bor's photograms. For Vane Bor's important contribution to the development of the genre of photogram, see: Floris M. Neuss, *Das Photogramm in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1990) and Eduarde Jaguer, *Les Mystères de la chambre noire: Le Surréalisme et la photographie* (1982).



in an exhibition of surrealist paintings and editions at the Cvijeta Zuzorić Art Pavilion in Belgrade in 1932.

In order to promulgate the group's theoretical-activist position, the Belgrade surrealists devoted significant energy to the production of theoretical texts, books, and commentaries that focused on the surrealist ethics-in-action in the years 1930-1932<sup>15</sup>. Yet, they also initiated a new bilingual journal *Nadrealizam danas i ovde* (*NDIO*) ("Surrealism Here and Now") whose editorial policy roughly corresponded to that of *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*<sup>16</sup>. As in *Nemoguće/L'Impossible*, the names of French and Yugoslavian surrealists appeared on the front cover in alphabetical order, implying that the magazine is a venue for both groups. Alongside the work of Yugoslav surrealists, there were again contributions by Char, Crevel, Eluard, and Tzara, as well as excerpts from Breton's still unpublished *Les Vases Communicants*, Dalí's projected novel *Vive le surréalisme*, and their responses to different surveys. *Nadrealizam danas i ovde* was distinctive for its innovative graphic set-up that combined futurist typographic experimentation with the surrealist art of juxtaposition-sans-transition and excellent illustrations by Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Alberto Giacometti, Joan Mirò, Dalí, Živanovic Noe, and others. All French contributions to the Belgrade journal were written, drawn, or photographed and sent by their authors designedly for this Belgrade publication<sup>17</sup>. Most of them were presented for the first time in print here, for instance Dalí's *Peinture*, Ernst's *Portrait*, Tanguy's *Les belles manières*, Giacometti's *Objet embarrassant à poser*, etc.

The constructivist typography of the last issue of *Nadrealizam danas i ovde* (June 1932) and the simplistic design favored by its editors made artistically conspicuous an interior ideological regrouping: the

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. the group programmatic text *Pozicija nadrealizma* ("The Position of Surrealism"), Marko Ristić and Koča Popović's *Nacrt za jednu fenomenologiju iracionalnog* ("Outline for a Phenomenology of the Irrational") (1931), Vane Bor and Marko Ristić's *Anti-Zid* ("Anti-Wall") (1932), etc.

<sup>16</sup> Marko Ristić was one of the nineteen European surrealists that initiated the foundation of *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*.

<sup>17</sup> The Serbian surrealists proudly acknowledged the genuine and friendly collaboration with the Paris group in the note on the covers: «The contribution by French surrealist featuring here in either the French language or in translation have not been published anywhere to date and have been sent in manuscript especially for this issue of *Nadrealizam sada i ovde*. Also, the illustrations (Dalí, Ernst, Tanguy, Giacometti) have been made from the original photographs, sent for this issue, and not from reproductions. They are also published here for the first time...» (*Nadrealizam danas i ovde* n. 2, Jan. 1932, s.p.).

young generation of surrealists moved towards a more radical leftist position. The Russian Futurism thus idiosyncratically fused with French surrealism in the art and ideology of the Belgrade Circle. Still, the undercover Marxist intelligentsia was not satisfied with the “surrealist” quantity of activism. The critiques leveled from the left-wing became as strong and ubiquitous as those coming from bourgeois conservatives or the governmental censors. Thus the movement had already been shattered by internal disagreements about its future pursuits when its artistic activity was suddenly cut short from the outside. What happened to the Belgrade surrealists at the end of 1932 and the beginning of 1933 one cannot find out from their all of a sudden increasingly rare publications. Rather, the information may be obtained in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* n. 6 (May 1933) where one may read René Crevel’s emotionally charged article «Des surrealists yougoslaves sont au bain»<sup>18</sup>. The text relates in detail the arrest of several Belgrade surrealists and their detention without trial, likening the terror of the Yugoslav pro-fascistic government to the rise of Nazism in Europe. Having most of its members in prison, in exile, or in immediate danger, the Belgrade Surrealist Circle dissipated. The international cooperative links were broken and collective action was replaced by scant individual artistic activities<sup>19</sup>. The avant-garde flame was gradually extinguished and the negotiations of desire took up different guises in the countries of former Yugoslavia.

This sketch of Serbian surrealism and the concrete simultaneity of work in the Paris and Belgrade circles might generate the impression of plainly analogous nature of surrealist enterprise in France and Yugoslavia. Yet, it should be borne in mind that the “periphery” groupings usually transform literary modes/movements to express the specificities of their own cultural and politico-historical positions; the Belgrade Surrealist Circle was no exception here. Even though the French avant-garde climate powerfully influenced the Serbian movement, the Belgrade surrealists still «had known something already before Paris», as Matić emphasized in a letter to Alain Jouffroy (Matić 1978: p. 9). The Belgrade surrealists felt that their artistic «corrective»

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<sup>18</sup> *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* 6 (May 1933): p. 36-39.

<sup>19</sup> What happened with the members of the Belgrade Group after the Second World War is noteworthy. Those surrealist rebels who remained in the country found themselves in comfortable political and artistic positions in their “new” Yugoslavia. Once a margin, they now dictated the cultural taste of the politically reorganized country. This is the reason why the experience of the avant-garde would have extraordinary significance for the culture of the new state.

to society was authentic; they believed it had been facilitated by their wide education and necessitated and fueled by the specificities of their own cultural and political context.

For the Yugoslav surrealist “time-and-space” to which I have alluded before differed greatly from the Paris surrealist chronotope. Bor’s surrealist photographs of a deserted Belgrade passage-road in the series «Jedan minut pre ubistva» (“One Minute before Murder”) speak well about the geopolitical and cultural particularities of this space. Bearing the scars of the First World War, the proto-urban capital presented in the photos is the political and cultural “suburbia” of Europe. The monarchical Yugoslavia «was not even a pertinent object for the passionate, consistent, and extreme negation of established norms and conventions of the bourgeois culture», as Ristić remarked later (Ristić 1970: p. 171). This political, economical, and cultural lag shaped the Belgrade surrealist project, making its adherents much more responsive to the idea of imminent political/poetical overthrow than their French counterparts. The Belgrade surrealists understood their artistic enterprise as a subversive act, «boundless, unselfish, and moral» (Ristić 2003: p. 166), in the face of which the French surrealist activities – even at their most radical – were innocuous. In turn, the Yugoslav authorities deemed surrealists rather a “party” than an artistic grouping and deemed their activity ambiguous and, for all accounts, dangerous<sup>20</sup>.

Thus the Belgrade surrealists found themselves in a hard-to-negotiate position: their artistic “rebellion” was both imported and innate. Interiorly, they were either persecuted or accused of excessive imitation of Western art. The conservatives predictably objected to the surrealist rebellious stature; the leftists, on the other hand, could not understand the surrealist reluctance to engage with the direct representation of reality. Exteriorly, the mutual understanding between the Belgrade group and the Paris spearheads was, in fact, everything but ideal. The political troubles of the Belgrade group sounded discordant to the ears in Paris. An exchange of letters between Ristić and Dedinac documents the initial misunderstandings. On February 15, 1927, Dedinac wrote to Ristić (then in Paris): «Marko, please try to get in contact with Breton and friends again. I cannot advise you to pass

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<sup>20</sup> Bans and injunctions were the fate of Serbian surrealism. The programmatic text *Pozicija nadrealizma* (“The Position of Surrealism”) was, for instance, banned immediately upon its appearance (10 Jan. 1931; 20 Jan. 1931; Ristić 2003: p. 179-185; 253-255), but republished in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* n. 3 (Dec. 1931). For the perception of Belgrade surrealists as a leftist party, cf. Vučo to Ristić (28 July 1930), the Legacy; Todić 2002: p. 211.

over certain differences [...] Our position is immeasurably more stupid and more brutal than theirs in France... For, just think what freedom means in our country... and what in theirs (not to mention our press law!)...» (Legacy; Todić 2002: p. 68). Differently conditioned, the artistic positions of the two circles grew more apart in the years to follow, even though the private contacts of Ristić and Breton continued for some time. The consequences of this ideological contra-positioning were serious: despite numerous private and artistic links between the two groups, Breton never mentioned the Belgrade surrealists in his later lectures throughout the world. Yet, the «peripheral» avant-garde groupings oftentimes «export» their version of a movement back to the center and it is probable that the close collaboration, on the one side, and the heated disputes between Breton and Ristić in the period 1926-7, on the other, at least partly influenced the course which the surrealist movement took in the years to follow. The Belgrade surrealists' emphatic interest in the ethics of creation presents one of the junctures from which a reciprocal influence – that exerted by the Belgrade Circle upon the Paris center – may have occurred.

The theoretical bent was another specificity of Serbian surrealism which found receptive audience in Breton and Eluard. Highly educated, the Belgrade surrealists paid specific attention to the philosophical grounding of their “doctrine”. The exemplary product of the Belgrade Circle's attempt to refract surrealist tenets through Hegelian dialectics and Husserlian phenomenology was Popović and Ristić's *Outline for a Phenomenology of the Irrational* (1931). This 122-page long treatise grounds the surrealist fusion of Freud and revolution in the concept of the irrational, a hermeneutic and psychological point in which the activity of the conscious and the unconscious are united, each serving as an incessant corrective to the other.

These concerns were reflected in the modes of aesthetic production to which the Belgrade surrealists inclined, namely, the kind of artistic expression which eschews the positivism of direct representation, yet keeps close links with the “concrete” world. In this light, it is not surprising that the Belgrade group cultivated experimental photography and collage and assigned a prominent role to the para-genres such as survey. The latter was the most adequate tool for fostering the ethics of incessant questioning and self-questioning and celebrate the diversity of opinions and artistic sensibilities within the Circle. On the other hand, the radical nature of the surrealist *humour noir*, its linguistic basis, and its philosophical and active subversivity

exerted a special allure for the Belgrade surrealists<sup>21</sup>. Judging the folklore and humor of the Balkan peoples paradigmatically surrealist, the Belgrade group transposed Jacques Vaché's theory of humor into what they saw as an authentic surrealist milieu, geographically and culturally at the edge of the Occidental rationalism. Forgotten puns, spells, rhythms, and rituals of the Balkans became the seed of surrealist exploration. Appropriately, the Belgrade Circle's most important programmatic letter (14 Apr. 1930) concludes with a folkloric definition of surrealism. Closing the manifesto, Vučo, Jovanović, Matić, and Ristić describe their artistic project with this remarkable folklore saying: «Surrealism: "I'll give you a ducat to smash the plate, to say both, it is and it is not, black and white, yes and no"» (Ristić 2003: p. 166). This untraceable but popular maxim, characteristic for its spell-like rhythm, is indeed "surrealist" in its essence. Widening the sphere of the manifesto-text and changing its modalities, this closure importantly articulates the activity of the Belgrade surrealists in indigenous terms. It also testifies to the Belgrade group's much closer relation to folklore than that exercised by the French surrealists.

This regional modification of surrealist project did not question the emphatically cosmopolitan proclivities of the group. In an ethnically relaxed way, the Belgrade surrealists celebrated the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the Balkan space in Europe. Constantly in transition, *on the train* between Paris and Belgrade, they seem to have embodied the very image of permanent transition, enduring in-betweenness, associated with the Balkans. Already in 1924, the Belgrade surrealists proposed that the most important objective of surrealism was – cosmopolitanism. The artifacts and texts in *Svedočanstva* n. 2 tried to prove a novel unity in spirit between European West and East, likening Breton's rebellion to that of Lenin/Mayakovsky five years before the Second Manifesto of Surrealism. Defining its global "artistic role" as that of a conduit, the Belgrade group made a sustained effort to fuse multiple European cultures and refract them through their own tradition. The Belgrade surrealists' openness to a variety of intellectual and cultural contexts and their unique lack of cultural resentment may be explained by the liminal nature of the avant-garde project itself. The absence of minority complex in fact indicates an adequate understanding of the emancipatory nature of the avant-garde, of its aesthetic and ethic "possibilism" which crosses differences as it incorporates them. With the fervor of converts reinforced by their

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. many essays by Marko Ristić, published in *Putevi, Nadrealizam danas i ovde* and *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*.

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specific geopolitical and cultural setting, the Belgrade surrealists envisioned a unity in artistic and social action that both encompassed and included cultural differences. That utopia is always simultaneously in- and exotopia they took for granted.

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