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VAN DEN BERG (Hubert), « The (European) Middle Ages as a template of the European twentieth-century avant-garde(s). The case of Dada in Zurich »

RÉSUMÉ – Alors que l'avant-garde européenne est souvent associée à un rejet du passé, le cas de Dada à Zurich indique le contraire. En témoigne l'intérêt pour la culture médiévale comme source d'inspiration pour les pratiques artistiques et littéraires d'avant-garde, dans Dada comme dans les mouvements d'avant-garde adjacents, mais aussi après la seconde guerre mondiale, comme le "vandalisme comparatif" d'Asger Jorn dans le contexte de Cobra et des documents de l'Internationale Situationniste.

MOTS-CLÉS – Dada, avant-gardes, art africain, cathédrale gothique, Moyen Âge, primitivisme, mysticisme, Cobra, vandalisme

## THE (EUROPEAN) MIDDLE AGES AS A TEMPLATE OF THE EUROPEAN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AVANT-GARDE(S)

### The case of Dada in Zurich

Literary and artistic movements in twentieth-century Europe, to which we tend to refer to as avant-garde or avant-gardes,<sup>1</sup> are generally seen as formations focused on radical innovation and often regarded as the spearhead of modernity. Many of these movements, if not all, were indeed marked by a fervent belief in change and progress. Not just the Italian Futurists, who embraced the future already in their self-denomination, but basically all “isms of art<sup>2</sup>” were marked by a strong orientation towards the future, in a way acknowledged on hindsight by the label “avant-garde” as it became a fashionable denomination in the second

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- 1 In scholarly literature, some authors tend to use “avant-garde” in singular, others the plural form “avant-gardes” to refer to the hybrid and heterogeneous configuration of movements, groups, currents, organizations and individual artists and writers pursuing innovative and experimental artistic and literary practices in the twentieth century (and sometimes the second half of the nineteenth century as well). Whereas in French literature predominantly the plural form is used, in German and Anglophone literature most authors use the singular form without any suggestion of a higher degree of unity and homogeneity. In this contribution, the singular form is used, but might be read in plural. “Historical avant-garde” is used here as an umbrella term for avant-garde movements in the first half of the twentieth century, as common in German historiography, yet without the valuation of the “historical avant-garde” as true avant-garde in contrast to the so-called “neo-avant-garde” after the Second World War in terms of Peter Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* (cf. van den Berg, Hubert, “On the historiographic distinction between historical and neo-avant-garde”, *Avant-garde / Neo-Avant-garde*, éd. Dietrich Scheunemann, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005, p. 63-74). The research for the following contribution was made possible by a grant of the Filozofická fakulta of the Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci in the framework of the FPVČ-programme.
  - 2 As the movements of the so-called historical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s were often referred to in the early twentieth century (cf. e.g. Arp, Hans, Lissitzky, El, *Die Kunstismen – Les Ismes de l’art – The Isms of Art 1914 – 1924*, Erlenbach, Rentsch, 1925), when the notion “avant-garde” was still a rarity as an umbrella term for these “isms” in pursuit of a “new art”.

half of the past century as a term stemming from and still associated with the theatre of war designating those military units being on the forefront in the most advanced position of the army they belong to.<sup>3</sup>

With their “new” and “newest”, “young” and “youngest” and outspoken “modern” or even “ultra-modern” art and literature, these avant-garde “isms of art” shared the conviction that the advance of a new art would (or should) promulgate and simultaneously advance a “new life”, a “new man” and a “new society”. As such, rejection of the “old” and the fostering of the past – in Futurist terms: *passatismo*, *passeism* – in all its shapes, be it in art and literature, be it society as a whole, may seem to be a basic attitude in the avant-garde coinciding with a pertinent rejection of existing conventions and traditions in the arts.

For sure, an antagonistic stance vis-à-vis hegemonic practices was a fundamental binding agent of the historical avant-garde with Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism as its major isms in the first decades of the past century. In a similar way, also so-called neo-avant-garde movements, as they emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, be it Cobra, the Situationist International, Neorealism, Fluxus or Pop Art, Conceptualism, Concrete Art and Poetry or Minimalism – to name just a few major strands – had a likewise modern or – as it has become a common label in Anglophone avant-garde studies – modernist inclination: the pretention to be the most up-to-date and most advanced approaches to art in modern society, responding to and absorbing contemporary modernity in their practices and rationale.

Here, the twentieth-century avant-garde in the European arts on the one hand and the Middle Ages on the other, in particular the proverbial “dark” Middle Ages as the *longue-durée* opposite of modernity, may seem to many rather worlds apart and their association almost a contradiction in terms. This may explain why the role of the Middle Ages as an orientation in the avant-garde or – what might be called – avant-garde medievalism has received hitherto little attention in avant-garde studies: the Middle Ages do not really fit in well into the

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3 van den Berg, “‘(Historische) Avantgarde’ als ‘Avantgarde’. Anmerkungen zu einem Traditionszusammenhang aus der zweiten Hälfte des vorigen Jahrhunderts”, *Avantgarden und Avantgardismus. Programme und Praktiken emphatischer kultureller Innovation*, éd. Andreas Mauz, Ulrich Weber, Magnus Wieland, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2018, p. 77-97.

common historiographic narratives of or theoretical reflections on the avant-garde and their – assumedly – essential traits.

However, if one does not see the avant-garde as it were as a jump out of history (as if such an escape would be possible), but – instead – as an in itself historical phenomenon, and if one recognizes, moreover, that virtually any innovative movement or current in the arts may see and present itself as a new direction in a contemporary setting, but has simultaneously its inspirations and orientation in practices and developments from the past, as it were as its own tradition and canon, even a radical pursuit of the new should not be mistaken for a complete dismissal of all and everything that could be labelled as “the old”. In this respect, also single avant-garde “isms” had, saw and recognised their precursors, some from a near, some from a distant past and some from both. This holds even true for Dada as the uncontested most radical spearhead of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

As for the European avant-garde and the Middle Ages, in the limited space of this contribution, a look at Dada may elucidate how the Middle Ages – against common expectations that current-day views on the avant-garde as an anti-traditionalist configuration of movements turning their back on the past – served indeed as a major template for this avant-garde movement. Despite its reputation today as a firmly nihilist avant-garde formation indulging in anti-art and a profound rejection of conventions in art and literature, even targeting, dissolving or – with a slightly anachronistic term – deconstructing language, and as such anti-traditionalist in optima forma, Dada had historically a far more constructive character than current-day historiography often suggests. This constructive trait of Dada is most clearly visible in the early phase of Dada in the years 1916-1917, when Dada was still confined to Zurich with the Cabaret Voltaire in the first half of 1916 and the Galerie Dada in the first half of 1917 as its essential outlets. And in Dada in its ultimately constructive character, also traditional art had a far more positive status than the negationist anti-character generally attributed to Dada seems to imply.

### “OLD AND NEW ART”

If we leave later assessments in scholarly literature, but also reinterpretations by former Dadaists after the Second World War for what they are,<sup>4</sup> Dada did not only possess a fundamental constructive impetus, which coincided most certainly with an – in many respects – destructive and iconoclastic tendency, as far as Dada aimed at a profound artistic renewal that presupposed a tabula rasa to allow such a fundamental renewal. In Dadaist programmatic texts, this endeavour is manifest in the frequent equation of Dada and “nothing”, both as pronoun and – sometimes capitalized – noun “nothing”/“Nothing”, in French both *rien* and *néant*, which might be read in some cases as a simple negation or drastic nihilist erasure. “Nothing” had, however, in Dada programmatically not a simple negationist character, but referred rather to a neutral zero point or – as the German philosopher Salomo Friedlaender, closely associated with Dada, put it in his theory of “creative indifference” – a *nihil neutrale*.<sup>5</sup> In present-day digital terms: the situation after a reboot or restart returning to the initial, original state of the system, in DOS-terms: all what remains after Ctrl + Alt + Del.

This may seem to imply a radical disbandment of all tradition (in computing terms, one might say: of the main memory, all changes made, updates added etc.), but meant actually a conscious return to some original situation, to a primordial, primitive state, in German: a return to an *Urzustand*, or in the name of a famous Czech beer brand, Plzeňský Prazdroj, German: Pilsner Urquell, a *prazdroj*, a *Urquelle* – a primordial source. As for Dada and other related avant-garde formations this meant a return to the true, pure, unspoiled state and original, primordial source and essentials of the arts. It was certainly no accident that Kurt Schwitters after a visit to Czechia started to refer to Hans

4 Cf. van den Berg, “From a New Art to a New Life and a New Man. Avant-garde Utopianism in Dada”, *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1906-1940)*, éd. Sascha Bru, Gunther Martens, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2006, p. 133-150: p. 134-137.

5 van den Berg, « “J’écris un manifeste... et je suis par principe contre les manifestes” (T. Tzara). Sur le caractère ambigu de l’(anti-)manifeste dadaïste », *Pamphlet, utopie, manifeste XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, éd. Lise Dumasy, Chantal Massol, Paris, Harmattan, 2001, p. 251-266.

(Jean) Arp as “Pra” – *pra* being the Czech equivalent of the German prefix *ur-*, as in *prazdroj, zdroj* meaning “source” in Czech.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of poetry and literature, Johann Gottfried Herder was an obvious precursor in his distinction of *Naturpoesie* in opposite to *Kunstpoesie* – natural versus artificial poetry with the former as the true, original, popular shape of poetry (*Volkspoesie*), echoed in the nineteenth century in the œuvre of collectors of popular tales, songs and lore like the Grimm’s and many other folklorists and ethnologists in Europe and beyond<sup>7</sup>. A typical move in the historical avant-garde was in this respect and essentially in the same line of thought, a return to – as it was seen – pure, unspoiled, basic or – one might say: primitive – elements: sounds and letters, as the sound poetry practiced in Zurich notably by Hugo Ball as well as by Kurt Schwitters in his so-called “Elementarpoesie”<sup>8</sup> (“elemental poetry”) and his famous *Ursonate*, a long sound poem presented as a libretto in sonata shape (initially: *Sonate in Urlauten* – Sonata in primordial sounds<sup>9</sup>). In case of the visual arts, an obvious equivalent was radical abstraction in the aesthetics of the Dutch Stijl group, only using lines and primary colours, or Kazimir Malevich’s iconic *Black Square*.

Here, it might be clear that the endeavour of a fundamental “new art” did not per se imply a dismissal of all art of the past. Indeed, even in Dada – next to a decisive break with many contemporary hegemonic conventions – also a no less fundamental affirmative interest and celebration of traditions summarized in programmatic statements as “old” or “ancient art”. As far as Dada was not only a radical spearhead of the historical avant-garde, but also in its original design and self-understanding a synthesis of the major isms from the years before the First World War – Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism – and in many respects an anticipation of Constructivism and Surrealism, Dada can be seen as a prism of the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, offering also clues for later avant-garde movements after the

6 Schwitters, Kurt, *Alle Texte*, vol. 4, *Die Reihe Merz 1923-1932*, éd. Ursula Kocher, Isabel Schulz, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019, p. 144 and 154.

7 Cf. Grätz, Manfred, *Das Märchen in der deutschen Aufklärung. Vom Feenmärchen zum Volksmärchen*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1988, p. 207-224.

8 Schwitters, *Elementar. Die Blume Anna. Die neue Anna Blume. Eine Gedichtsammlung aus den Jahren 1918-1922*, Berlin, Der Sturm, 1923.

9 Schwitters, *Alle Texte*, vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 391-435.

Second World War, as far as several of these movements took Dada or what they assumed Dada stood for as a major orientation for their own endeavours to promote and create a “new art” and, as far as the recurrence on the Middle Ages is the focus of this contribution, a Dada soirée in the Galerie Dada devoted to “Alte und Neue Kunst” – “Old and New Art” on 12 May 1917 may serve here as a prism of Dada medievalism.<sup>10</sup>

“New art” as the main objective of the historical avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth century as well as of Dada, at least in its early Zurich phase, was marked by strong heterogeneity and an anything but distinct shape, if one considers the stylistic and formal diversity that marked the artistic practices and production of the wide range of avant-garde “isms”. Here, obvious communalities can be discerned between Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism or its French precursor Fauvism, e.g. in their predilection for abstraction, be it in different degrees, or in their ambition to bring “art and life” together in one way or another. Simultaneously, there can be little doubt about profound differences, which allow us today to distinguish at least in many cases between – say – an Expressionist, Futurist or a Cubist painting and between different understandings of the “life”, that should be either (re-)presented in art or (re-)united with art, e.g. with a penchant for modern technique and mechanics in Futurism or a desire for a (re-)turn to nature and a natural habitat in the Expressionism of a group like *Die Brücke*. Not only between single isms, but also in single avant-garde isms (or what we understand as single isms today) a considerable pluriformity can be observed, e.g. in Cubism between as well as in the single *œuvres* of, for example, Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris on the one hand and Jean Metzinger, Albert Bloch or a painter-sculptor like Oleksandr Archipenko. Not only in its initial ambition to offer a synthesis of the main avant-garde isms of the early 1910s, but also in its artistic and literary production virtually without exception all forms and techniques used and applied by the Dadaists can be found already in Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism. This holds even true for artistic and literary forms and techniques nowadays often identified as typically Dada, like – for example – sound and letter

10 In digitized form, the invitation for and three-page programme of the soirée, preceded by the invitation for the exhibition in the Galerie Dada that served as its ambiance, can be found on the website of the Zurich Kunsthaus. URL: [https://digital.kunsthhaus.ch/viewer/image/21739/1/LOG\\_0000/](https://digital.kunsthhaus.ch/viewer/image/21739/1/LOG_0000/), accessed 22/06/2023. All references to the programme of the soirée on the following pages can be found here in original.

poetry, as already the German art historian Werner Haftmann pointed out in his “Postscript” of Hans Richter’s monograph *Dada – Art and Anti-Art*, the first comprehensive history of Dada<sup>11</sup>.

As for the high degree of indeterminacy and vagueness of what “new art” in the avant-garde in general or in Dada in particular exactly was or had to look like, it should be noted here that “new art” or *un art nouveau* in French in Tzara’s programmatic writings<sup>12</sup>, was as a standing term in the mid-1910s anything but a new label. An indication here is already the common French and English denomination for what in German is called *Jugendstil*: Art Nouveau (and as for the use of capitals in this denomination: also in the avant-garde of the 1910s, *art nouveau*, *neue Kunst* or the same word combination in other languages was often written with capitals as well). In fact, “new art” as common denomination for modern art, often including literature as well, was already widely used in the late nineteenth century like the combination “art and life” – in German *Kunst und Leben* – as a recurrent ideal in modern culture and art, not per se and partially even anything but avant-garde since the last quarter of the preceding century, e.g. in the names of German periodicals like *Kunst und Leben. Ein neuer Almanach für das deutsche Haus* (1877-1880), *Der Kunstwart. Monatshefte für Kunst, Literatur und Leben* (1887-1932) or the Art Nouveau journal *Jugend. Münchner illustrierte Wochenschrift für Kunst und Leben* (1896-1940). Likewise, the merge of “art and life” was a major endeavour of the English Arts and Crafts movement, stipulated in the writings of William Morris and John Ruskin. At least on a terminological and conceptual level, the historical avant-garde and even Dada were far more in tune with the times and less unconventional than their present-day reputation and – for sure – their own proclamations tried to suggest.

As far as “old art” is concerned, in particular as a source of inspiration and template for avant-garde “new art”, the scope of this “old art” is marked by a similar, if not even higher degree of indeterminacy, vagueness and to a considerable extent seemingly random eclecticism, as in the “new art” pursued by the avant-garde in general. In Zurich Dada, the broad umbrella term reflected the main objective of the Dadaists to be a continuation and a synthesizing platform of the preceding

11 Haftmann, Werner, “Postscript”, Hans Richter, *Dada – Art and Anti-Art*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1964, p. 215-222 : p. 216-218.

12 Cf. Tzara, Tristan, « Le Dadaïsme », *Dada*, n° 3, 1918, p. 2.

early-1910s avant-garde as “the *Fronde* of the major international art movements<sup>13</sup>”. This is most obvious in the design and programme of the Dada soirée devoted to “Old and New Art” in the Galerie Dada in May 1917, planned and announced as main event accompanying a self-curated exhibition showing “Graphik, Broderie, Relief” (graphic work, embroidery, wall relief) by members of the Dada group and artists in their immediate environs. In fact, both the exhibition in the Galerie Dada and its programmatic rationale elaborated in the set-up of the soirée – a by and large literary evening – were a reprise of an exhibition of works by Hans (Jean) Arp and the Dutch artists Otto van Rees and Adya van Rees-Dutilh in the Zurich gallery Tanner in November 1915, an event later praised by Tzara<sup>14</sup> as “grande rumeur des hommes nouveaux” and as it were as the announcement of Dada in his “Chronique zurichoise 1915-1919” in the Berlin *Dada-Almanach*. The Tanner exhibition was not just virtually identical with the exhibition in the Galerie Dada in May 1917 in its choice of artistic forms on show as its title indicates: *Moderne Wandteppiche, Stickereien, Malereien, Zeichnungen* – “Modern wall tapestries, needlework, paintings, drawings”. As far as the soirée is concerned, its programmatic outline echoed or followed almost literally Arp’s text in the Tanner catalogue, in particular his summarizing conclusion:<sup>15</sup>

*Die neue Kunst ist so neu wie die ältesten Gefässe, Städte, Gesetze und wurde von den Völkern Asiens, Amerikas, Afrikas und zuletzt von den Gothikern geübt.*

“The new art is as new as the oldest vessels, cities, laws, and was practiced by the peoples of Asia, America, Africa and lastly by the Goths.”

In a programmatic statement outlining the scope and intentions of the soirée “Alte und Neue Kunst”, Hugo Ball explained its set-up as follows:

*Die Soirée geht von dem Gedanken aus, dass die jüngsten künstlerischen Bestrebungen nicht nur fragmentarische und abrupte Bedeutung haben, dass sie sich vielmehr die*

13 Huelsenbeck, Richard, “Erste Dadarede in Deutschland”, *Dada-Almanach*, éd. Richard Huelsenbeck, Berlin, Reiss, 1920, p. 104-108 : p. 108.

14 Tzara, “Chronique zurichoise 1915-1919”, *Dada-Almanach*, *ibid.*, p. 10-29: p. 10.

15 Arp, “Diese Arbeiten sind Bauten”, *Otto van Rees, Paris, Hans Arp, A.C. van Rees-Dutilh, Paris, Moderne Wandteppiche, Stickereien, Malereien, Zeichnungen*, Zürich, Galerie Tanner, 1915, p. 2-3: p. 3. I would like to thank here Raimund Meyer (Zurich) most cordially for supplying me with a photographic copy of this rare catalogue.

*Stilelemente der neuen Kunst, monumentale Konstruktion, Phantastik und Naïveté, in den Werken der alten Kunst, insbesondere der Neger und Gotiker bestätigt finden.*<sup>16</sup>

“The soirée emanates from the thought that the youngest artistic aspirations do not just have a fragmentary and abrupt significance. Instead, the stylistic elements of new art – monumental construction, fantasy and naïveté – are rather confirmed by the works of old art, in particular of the Negroes and the Gothics.”

Rephrased: what might seem from a contemporary perspective a marginal (“fragmentary”) and at the same time radical, drastic (“abrupt”) break with the past, should be seen rather as a continuation or resumption of ancient artistic and aesthetic practices, both European and global, with key elements: “monumental construction, fantasy and naïveté”. “Monumental construction” referred primarily to Gothic ecclesiastic architecture, in particular Gothic cathedrals (in Arp’s text: “cities”), serving next to the (music) theatre – as proposed by Richard Wagner – as a major orientation in the avant-garde pursuit of the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) in an architectural shape.

A second reference was the use of abstract ornamentation in Central-European rural architecture as part of so-called *Volkskunst* (folk art) or *Bauernkunst* (peasant’s art) as a still living European tradition of original, true, genuine, uncorrupted art and craft, that might have been dismissed from a European high-art perspective as naïve, unsophisticated and primitive, yet simultaneously as a true popular expression and cultural practice. As such, these rural artistic practices were held in high esteem in the Central-European avant-garde, also in Zürich Dada, as truly authentic art, not least because it was not created as part of an individual endeavour and ambition to harvest personal gain, but rather as a token of anonymous, often collective creativity and as such far more capable to allow an organic coherence of “art and life”, in the sense of a unity of art and society as well as a unity between humankind and the world. Although European traditional folk art is neither mentioned by Ball and Tzara nor by Arp in their statements, an obvious allusion to or rather an appropriation of typical decoration in traditional folk art is a woodcut vignette by Hans Arp on the cover of the invitation for the exhibition “Graphik, Broderie, Relief” and soirée “Alte und Neue

16 Ball, Hugo, “Alte und neue Kunst”, *Ausstellung von Graphik, Broderie, Relief*, Zürich, Galerie Dada, 1917, p. 2.

Kunst” as a visual sign post in the same style as a series of wood cuts for the poetry volume *Phantastische Gebete* (1916) by Richard Huelsenbeck as one of the first publications of the book series “Collection Dada<sup>17</sup>”.

Naïveté and *Phantastik* (translated in many dictionaries as “fantasy”, but maybe more properly to be translated as “the fantastic”, since not simply *Phantasie* was meant, but rather a constellation, in which fantasy could evolve freely) in the statement outlining the set-up of the soirée, referred both to the essential self-understanding of the Zurich Dadaists obvious in one of the meanings of the self-denomination “Dada” as reference to the first sounds of a baby starting to speak and as such hinting at the previous mentioned inclination to primordialism and the endeavour to revive art in its supposedly original, primordial, primitive shape to be found in children’s drawings (shown at the exhibition that served as the environment of the soirée “Old and New Art”), in artistic and literary practices from other continents, both from the past and from the present (in the exhibition represented by next to African sculptures from the collection of Han Coray, from whom the Dadaists had taken over the gallery), and in Europe still surviving in traditional popular art and craft and in a flourishing, still hegemonic shape in the medieval – Gothic – art and culture. As such, Gothic art was seen as the European counterpart of classicist sophistication, already in classical high Antiquity, but in more recent centuries in the Renaissance and eighteenth-century Classicism, rejected as a major “illusionist” aberration and root for the deplorable shape of Europe in the grip of the cultural crisis, which the Great War in the eyes of the Dadaists was – a war regarded by them as cul-de-sac of an erroneous development in European society and high culture.

Highly problematic in the programmatic preamble of the soirée is – at least from a present-day perspective – the use of the term *Neger* as a meanwhile impossible word due to the nowadays prevailing derogatory connotations of the “N-word”. Here, it should be noted, though, that it was still used in the 1910s as neutral denomination for people with a dark skin.<sup>18</sup> As for the apparent correlation of “negroes” and “naïveté”,

17 In digitized form, *Phantastische Gebete. Verse* (Zürich, Collection Dada, 1916) with Hans Arp’s woodcuts can be consulted on the website of the Zurich Kunsthaus. URL : [https://digital.kunsthaus.ch/viewer/image/19698/1/LOG\\_0000/](https://digital.kunsthaus.ch/viewer/image/19698/1/LOG_0000/), accessed 22/06/2023.

18 This should not distract, though, from the fact that the perception of people with a dark skin in Africa or other continents by the Dadaists had – at least in some cases – an outspoken racist dimension, e.g. in the case of Richard Huelsenbeck, involved in Dada in

as a tag for simplicity, unsophistication, artlessness and primitivism, a current-day reader might see an affirmation here for the pejorative, degrading character of the “N-word”. In respect to Dada, it should not be overseen, however, that the Dadaists themselves regarded Dada as essentially “naïve”, celebrating “naïveté” as an ideal of their understanding of “new art” that dismissed sophistication in art as fundamental problem in European culture. Against this background, being naïve, simple, primitive and primordial was – according to Ball, Arp and other Dadaists – not just far more preferable, but actually a laudable prerequisite of “old” and “oldest”, both exotic and European – one might say: global – art as an essential beacon for a necessary rejuvenation of the arts they pursued without any – at least in this respect intended – discrimination of non-European art and its creators, irrespective of skin colours.

Still highly questionable remains, however, not only the undeniably biologicistic-essentialist linkage of epidermal pigmentation with certain cultural practices, but also the obvious indiscriminate application of this biologicistic criterion as far as – given the programme of the evening – it referred both to representatives of the non-European, dark-skin indigenous population in different regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and the dark-skin Aboriginal population of Australia, lumping texts from their divergent oral literary traditions together under the umbrella term “negro verses”. When – as announced in the programme – Hugo Ball as the first performer of the soirée recited “Negerverse” followed by sound poems by himself, these comprised actually only cult songs from the Australian Luritja. When Tzara followed later with recitals with “Vers nègres”, which he had “translated” himself according to

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Zurich in 1916, but back in Germany already in 1917 and as such not taking part in the soirée. The use of the “N-word” by him in labelling his appropriation of elements from indigenous African oral poetry in his *Phantastische Gebete* (op. cit.) and his performances as “Dada drummer” (*Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, New York, Viking Press, 1974) suggesting a re-enactment of drummed rhythms from Sub-Saharan Africa coincided definitely with profound racist views, most obvious in a later autobiographic travel book on a journey to Africa (*Afrika in Sicht. Ein Reisebericht über fremde Länder und abenteuerliche Menschen*, Dresden, Jess, 1928). Although written a decade after his Dada engagement, his affirmative reference to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s even more drastically racist *Mafarka le Futuriste. Roman africain* (Paris, Sansot, 1909) in *Phantastische Gebete* (op. cit., p. 10-11) and an imagery of black Africans in a way highly reminiscent of Marinetti’s “African novel” throughout the *Phantastische Gebete* leave little doubt about Huelsenbeck’s views in the Dada years.

the programme (in fact only half-way: not from the original texts, but from German translations in the German ethnological review *Anthropos* collecting field studies by Catholic missionaries, used as source by Ball as well<sup>19</sup>), these “verses” comprised again songs of Luritja provenance as well of songs from the Aboriginal Australian Arrernte lumped together by Tzara into a potpourri with songs from the East- and South-African Kinga, Ronga and Sotho as well as the West-African Ewe. One might argue here that Ball and Tzara differed from Arp in a dual way, not only by their inclusion of Australia as a continent not named by Arp, but also by their use of the “N-word”.

As for the other non-European samples of “Old Art” at the soirée, at least Asia was represented as well by an “old Chinese fairy tale”, actually a legend or myth from the Tang period (read from the volume *Chinesische Volksmärchen* published by Eugen Diederichs Verlag in 1914<sup>20</sup>), and “Arabic dance rhythms” performed by the Swiss composer Hans Heusser on the piano. Asia was also present in another form: in a chapter from the medieval story of *Herzog Ernst* recited by Hans Arp, in which the protagonist, Duke Ernest, visits an imaginary island located near India.

## DADA AND EARLY AVANT-GARDE MEDIEVALISM

Next to the visual reference to European folk art on the cover of the combined invitation for the exhibition and the soirée, most of “old art” presented in the soirée with a European provenance stemmed from the Middle Ages or from early modern times (late fifteenth to seventeenth century), yet with an assumed mindset of its authors that qualified them in the perspective of the Zurich Dadaists still as late *Gotiker* or their immediate heirs and descendants – as core component of “old art”, yet as part of this art in its global contours.

The German noun *Gotiker* (both singular and plural) as derivative of *Gotik* (in a different orthography also *Gothik* and, hence, *Gothiker*, as in

19 Cf. Schrott, Raoul (éd.), *Dada 15-25: post scriptum oder Die himmlischen Abenteuer des Hrn. Tristan Tzara*, Innsbruck, Haymon, 1992, p. 106-107, 116-118.

20 Cf. Wilhelm, Richard (éd.), *Chinesische Volksmärchen*, Jena, Diederichs, 1914.

Arp's text) is an untranslatable word without an exact matching equivalent in English or French. Meanwhile antiquated and not a common term in present-day German anymore, *Gotiker* was actually a neologism from the nineteenth century that became a quite fashionable notion in the first decades of the twentieth century related to a likewise highly fashionable medievalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with an obvious Romanticist vein and in Germany also entangled with the rise of German nationalism, in which "Gothic" architecture, art and culture were seen as the medieval prime of German culture. *Gotiker* referred in this context in a more strict sense to architects and builders as well as artists – painters, sculptors – working in a Gothic style, but simultaneously referring in a wider sense to anyone with an assumedly medieval mindset, *der von mittelalterlichem Lebensgefühl erfüllte und bestimmte Künstler und Mensch allgemein* – "the artist and man in general pervaded and determined by a medieval attitude to life"<sup>21</sup>. *Gotiker* (singular) might be provisionally translated as "Gothic", as a parallel term – as such in English non-existent – next to "Romantic" referring to someone adhering to Romanticism, with a similar inflationary and imprecise use in the German veneration of the *Gotiker* in the early twentieth century, a highly popular and widespread veneration that could be observed throughout the German cultural field: from utterly reactionary and conservative to the most radical formations of the avant-garde, including Dada in Zurich.<sup>22</sup> Given the German nationalist edge of this – one might say – Gothicism as a typical German variety of medievalism in those days, it should be noted, though, that this nationalist retrograde-chauvinist dimension was definitely omnipresent, even in the avant-garde, e.g. in an understanding of German Expressionism as continuation or revival of German Gothic or – vice versa – of German Gothic as medieval Expressionism,<sup>23</sup> however: not per se. In the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*,<sup>24</sup> in which the whole range of "old art" to be found in Dada is present as

21 Kochs, Theodor (éd.), *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. 8, Glibber – Gräzist, Leipzig, Hirzel, 1958, col. 999.

22 Cf. Gebhardt, Volker, *Das Deutsche in der deutschen Kunst*, Köln, Dumont, 2004, p. 101-239.

23 E.g. Behne, Adolf, "Deutsche Expressionisten", *Der Sturm*, vol. 5, nos 17-18, 1914, p. 114-115, and the case of Lothar Schreyer, cf. van den Berg, "Lothar Schreyers Beiträge in *Die Unvergessenen*. Hinweis auf eine historische Verknüpfung von klassischer Avantgarde und konservativer Revolution", *Ernst Jünger – eine Bilanz*, éd. Natalia Żarska, Gerald Diesener, Wojciech Kunicki, Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010, p. 178-199: p. 181-184.

24 Kandinsky, Vassily, Marc, Franz (éd.), *Der Blaue Reiter*, München, Piper, 1913.

well. A theatre play authored by the Russian painter Vassily Kandinsky, “Der gelbe Klang. Eine Bühnenkomposition” (“The yellow sound. A stage composition”<sup>25</sup>) not only alludes in its shape and text to Western-European medieval miracle plays, but is combined in its presentation in the almanac with late-medieval German woodcuts. These prints stemmed from Wilhelm Worringer’s *Die altdutsche Buchillustration*, published the year before by the same publisher, Piper in Munich, who printed *Der Blaue Reiter*, allowing Kandinsky and Marc to use the clichés for Worringer’s book. Whereas that book was a typical product of German national Gothicism<sup>26</sup>, the editors of *Der Blaue Reiter*, Kandinsky and Franz Marc, saw their almanac as an international compendium<sup>27</sup>, also reflected in their presentation of Gothic architecture and art, including a painting by Robert Delaunay of the Gothic interior of the Parisian church of St. Séverin<sup>28</sup>.

In a similar way, Gothic and *Gotiker* presented by the Dadaists at the soirée “Old and New Art” were not exclusively German, in line with a remark by Hugo Ball in the first Dada anthology, *Cabaret Voltaire*, in which he underpinned the genuine international character of Dada, stressing that “une interprétation nationaliste” would be a wrong reading of the anthology with no “relation avec la ‘mentalité allemande’<sup>29</sup>”. The same is clear in the European medieval components of the soirée “Old and New Art”, here in order of appearance:

- Italian religious and mystical poetry by Jacopone da Todi “and popular anonymous” poets from the 13th century – recited by Alberto Spaini (“A. Spa” in the programme) as guest performer, who as a philologist might have used old texts, also since most of the Zurich audience would not have been able to understand the Italian anyhow, but maybe (unlike the Italian announcement in the programme) he did so in German translation as the scholar in German literature he was, living for long time in Berlin in the years before the war.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 117-131.

26 Cf. Gebhardt, *Das Deutsche in der deutschen Kunst*, op. cit., p. 143-145.

27 van den Berg, “Lothar Schreyers Beiträge in *Die Unvergessenen*”, art. cité, p. 198.

28 *Der Blaue Reiter*, op. cit., p. 50.

29 Ball, “Notes Redactionelles – Redactionelle Notizen”, *Cabaret Voltaire. Eine Sammlung künstlerischer und literarischer Beiträge*, éd. Hugo Ball, Zürich, Cabaret Voltaire, 1916, p. 32.

- Lyrical texts by three German mystics in modern German: the 13th-century Mechtild of Magdeburg, an anonymous member of the Johanniter Order from Strasbourg as well as an anonymous monk from Heilsbronn, both 14th century – all recited by Emmy Hennings from an edition in the Insel-Bücherei, *Von Gottes- und Liebfrauenminne. Lieder aus der deutschen Mystik*, first published in 1913, but with a second imprint in 1917, in other words: directly from the bookstore<sup>30</sup>.
- A story from the extremely popular medieval versified adventure novel *Herzog Ernst* (12th century, but here from a translation in modern German based on a 15th-century version, recited by Hans Arp, likewise published in 1913 in the pocketbook series Insel-Bücherei): *Wie er in einer Insel mit gar großen Vögeln stritt und die auch überwand* – “How he fought with very large birds on an island and defeated them<sup>31</sup>”.
- A causerie, probably accompanied by images being shown, by the Romanian painter and architect Marcel Janco on “Principes de l’architecture ancienne [...] concernant la peinture et l’art abstrait” focusing on ecclesial edifices in Florence – Filippo Brunelleschi’s Santa Maria del Fiore and Leon Battista Alberti’s Santa Maria Novella – as well as on French “ancient architecture” using plates from the handbooks of the 18th-century Jacques-François Blondel, himself a classicist architect, probably *L’Architecture française, ou Recueil de plans, d’élévations, coupes et profils* (1752-1756) in a recent re-edition,<sup>32</sup> in which charts, ground plans and visualizations of architectural details offered a wealth of (semi-)abstract images, also from previous centuries. The fact that Janco focused on Italy and France and left German Gothic architecture aside, was certainly not accidental. In the case of Brunelleschi and Alberti, many would classify their designs of the Santa Maria del Fiore and Santa Maria Novella as early Renaissance architecture. As the title of Janco’s causerie indicates, of which the text did not survive, he regarded them as still “ancient” and as such, as others do as well, as Gothic.

30 Cf. Grimm, Heinrich Adolf (éd.), *Von Gottes- und Liebfrauenminne. Lieder aus der deutschen Mystik*, Leipzig, Insel, 1917, p. 5-8, 38-41.

31 Rüttgers, Severin (éd.), *Historie eines edeln Fürsten, Herzog Ernst von Bayern und von Österreich*, Leipzig, Insel, 1913, p. 76-79.

32 Guadet, Julien (éd.), *Réimpression de l’architecture française de Jacques François Blondel*, Paris, Levy, 1904-1905 (4 vol.).

- Finally, Tristan Tzara read the 13th-century “Complainte” by the Parisian author Rutebeuf, most likely in a modern French version, yet with a strong Romanian accent, which made his French difficult to comprehend for a Zurich audience.<sup>33</sup>

Next to the programme elements of a medieval provenance, to which also a piano recital by Hans Heusser might be counted, “Fragments from ‘Sancta Susanna’”, the programme offered also the recitation of early-modern texts, at least one even more Renaissance than the Florentine churches: a fragment read by Arp from a travel journey by Albrecht Dürer to the Southern Low Countries in 1520-1521, again from a Insel-Bücherei edition.<sup>34</sup> Next to Dürer, rather a Renaissance humanist, the other early-modern authors were either mystics or occult writers: Jacob Böhme (Arp), Nostradamus (Tzara) and Aegidius Albertinus (Ball).

In the programme of the soirée, a permanent alternation takes place between the recitation of texts from the categories “old” and “new art”, mostly poetry by the writing Dadaists – Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara – as well as a selection of Italian authors, with whom the Dadaists stood in contact, mostly avant-garde, but not Futurist à la Marinetti (read by Tzara and Spainini, the latter a scholar, critic and translator, in 1917 not yet a poet or prose writer himself). As for the relation between the medieval “old” and the Dadaist “new” and the directional character of the “ancient” samples of a medieval provenance, basically three dimensions seem to have been pivotal in Dadaist recurrence on “the works of the old art” of the “Gothics”.

(1) *Related to form*, in the case of the visual arts, Janco’s choice to foreground the Florentine Santa Maria del Fiore and Santa Maria Novella as “ancient” showcases of “monumental construction” at the tail end of Gothic architecture giving guidance to new abstract art – instead of Northern French and German church buildings – was obviously related to the application of geometric mosaic both in the furnishing of the facades and the interior walls and floors. Here, it was certainly not accidental that the white plastered, subtly decorated ceiling construction of the – Dutch Gothic – Grote Kerk of St.-Bavokerk (Saint-Bavo Church)

33 van den Berg, “Inleiding”, Tristan Tzara, *Manifeste Dada 1918. Eerste drukversie*, éd. Hubert van den Berg, Nijmegen, Vantilt, 2009, p. 2-4: p. 2.

34 Dürer, Albrecht, *Tagebuch der Reise in die Niederlande*, éd. Fritz Bergemann, Leipzig, Insel, 1914.

in the city Haarlem with its geometric repetition and – as in the case of Janco's Florentine samples – a predominance of white and bright colours served Theo van Doesburg as “crystal sphere” in 1916 as a major inspiration in the elaboration of the Constructivist style of De Stijl in its geometric-abstract minimalism.<sup>35</sup> Van Doesburg and Janco were not aware of each other in 1916-1917, like van Doesburg had no knowledge of Hans Arp's programmatic statement for the Tanner exhibition in Zurich in 1915 that opened with the remark: *Diese Arbeiten sind Bauten aus Linien, Flächen, Formen, Farben* – “These works are constructions of lines, planes, forms, colours<sup>36</sup>”, which made the exhibited works by himself and the Van Rees couple as old “as the oldest” art, “practiced [...] lastly by the Goths”.

In the case of literature, own works recited by Emmy Hennings, preceding and following the texts by medieval mystics she read, had the most direct recurrence to medieval form: a lamentation with a prayer-like character, “O ihr Heiligen” (“O you Saints”), opening her part of the evening and a self-written holy legend as its conclusion.<sup>37</sup> Whereas Hugo Ball's recitation of his own sound poetry was preceded at the soirée in May 1917 by Aboriginal Australian cult songs, a year earlier he noted in his diary after the recitation of his sound poetry in the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 – in a Cubist costume designed by Janco performing as a “magic bishop”, that his presentation assumed:

*die uralte Kadenz der priesterlichen Lamentation [...], jenen Stil des Meßgesangs, wie er durch die Kirchen des Morgen- und Abendlandes webklingt.*<sup>38</sup>

“the ancient cadence of the priestly lamentation [...], that chant style, that keens through the churches of the Orient and Occident.”

In Richard Huelsenbecks simultaneously published *Phantastische Gebete* the only – in a strict sense – sound poem of the volume was entitled “Chorus Sanctus”, with only one word at the end of the poem, “leiomen” alluding to Greek word *λεῖω* (in New Testamentary Greek: “rest”) and, thus, giving it a Byzantine twist:

35 Cf. Forgács, Éva, *Malevich and interwar modernism. Russian art and the International of the Square*, London, Bloomsbury, 2022, p. 61.

36 Arp, “Diese Arbeiten sind Bauten”, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

37 Hennings, Emmy, *Helle Nacht. Gedichte*, Berlin, Reiss, 1922, p. 21.

38 Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Zürich, Limmat, 1992, p. 106.

## CHORUS SANCTUS

a a o	a e i	i i i	o i i
u u o	u u e	u i e	a a i
ha dzk	drrr bn	obn br	buss bum
ha haha	hihihi	lilili	leiomen <sup>39</sup>

As in the case of Ball's sound poetry drawing both on African and Australian cult songs and on hymns and lamentations of "ancient" Christian origin, Huelsenbeck's "fantastic prayers" combined in a similar way both exotic elements and ancient – medieval – religious chanting. At least formally, the texts by the German mystics read by Hennings as well as those by Jacopone da Todi and Rutebeuf all belonged to the latter European medieval tradition.

(2) *Related to content*, most obvious in Arp's poetry, as recited by him at the soirée and published initially in German under the title "aus – die wolkenpumpe" ("from: the pump of clouds") in the Zurich review *Dada*,<sup>40</sup> later rephrased in French in the collection *le siège d'air*,<sup>41</sup> is the fantastic imagery matching – as far as curious creatures and natural phenomena are concerned – figures and features encountered by Duke Ernest in his adventures. Arp anticipated in writing what became a major medieval template in Surrealism as "fantastic art", as Alfred H. Barr Jr. wrote in his introduction to the catalogue of the first major exhibition devoted to Dada and Surrealism in the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1936:

Fantastic subject matter has been found in European art of all periods. The art of the middle ages, with its scenes of Hell [...] and the Apocalypse, its circumstantial illustrations of holy miracles [...] and supernatural marvels [...], seems from a rational point of view to have been predominantly fantastic. Most of this subject matter was of a traditional or collective character, but the Dutch artist [Hieronymus] Bosch [...], working at the end of the Gothic period, transformed traditional fantasy into a highly personal and original vision which links his art with that of the modern Surrealists.<sup>42</sup>

39 Huelsenbeck, *Phantastische Gebete*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

40 Arp, "aus – die wolkenpumpe", *Dada*, n<sup>os</sup> 4-5, 1919, p. 21-22.

41 Arp, *Le siège de l'air. Poèmes 1915-1945*, Paris, Vville, 1946, p. 15-26.

42 Barr, Alfred H. (éd.), *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1936, p. 9.

In the programme of the soirée, the Dutch Baroque author Aegidius Albertinus, framed as heir of a Gothic mindset, served with his *Lucifers Königreich und Seelengejaidt, oder Narrenbätz* (1617, “Lucifer’s kingdom and pursuit of souls, or fool’s coursing”) in a similar way or – one might argue – rather as an early-modern intermediary of the fantastic Gothic grotesque. From Albertinus’ book, Ball recited a fragment on the many names of Satan, followed by a chapter from his own grotesque-fantastic Dada novel *Tenderenda der Phantast*.<sup>43</sup>

(3) *Related to practice*, as far as literature is concerned, a predominant medieval template was in the first place mysticism, not only in Dada, but also – in the historical avant-garde setting – in Central-European Expressionism. In the second place, both in literature and the visual arts and most notably in architecture the anonymity of many authors, artists and artisans in the European Middle Ages served as an ideal, in particular since it implied that individual authorship and artistic production were integrated in a collective practice, in which, moreover, artists and craftsmen worked in an organic unity most apparent in the “monumental construction” of Gothic cathedral building as a collective enterprise that united virtually all arts and “art and life”. In this respect, Gothic cathedrals in their monumental shape merging both medieval spirituality and artistic production in their design, construction and purport served as an overarching key template and orientation not only in Zurich Dada, but in later years also in the Bauhaus.<sup>44</sup>

When in 1919 the continuation of the Großherzoglich-Sächsische Kunstgewerbeschule (Grand-Ducal Saxonian School for Applied Arts) in Weimar is rebaptized in Staatliches Bauhaus, the new name of the institution not only signals the new political situation in the new German – Weimar – Republic and Thuringia, in which the monarchy and also rule by higher nobility is formally abandoned and the new school becomes a republican state institution, but also alluded to an idealized understanding of the so-called *Bauhütten* or *Dombauhütten* (French: *chantiers*, *loges des bâtisseurs*, *ateliers de cathédrale* or – in the case of the Strasbourg cathedral – *l’Œuvre Notre-Dame*), which served as the

43 Ball, *Tenderenda, der Phantast*, éd. Raimund Meyer, Julian Schütt, Innsbruck, Haymon, 1999.

44 Cf. Källström, Staffan, *Framtidens katedral. Medeltidsdröm och utopisk modernism*, Stockholm, Carlssons, 2000.

organizational frames and practical workshops responsible for the design, building and maintenance of Gothic cathedrals in all their aspects as collective enterprises, in which the application of all arts and crafts served a collective objective, organically embedded and fully integrated in medieval society. As such, the Gothic *Bauhütte* served in dual way as medieval template for two major ideals of the early twentieth-century avant-garde: the (re-)unification of the single arts in the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art or – with another contemporary term: the monumental work of art) as well as the (re-)unification of “art and life” as a recurring conception in the historical avant-garde. Emblematic is here a woodcut by Lyonel Feininger serving as title page for the founding manifesto of the Bauhaus, showing a cathedral in an abstract environment – halfway between Expressionism (as the background of many Bauhaus teachers or Meister – “masters” – as they were called, alluding again to the hierarchy in medieval *Bauhütten* and guild orders) and Constructivism and constructive Functionalism as the major aesthetic frames in the Bauhaus in the following years.

To return to the initial question of this contribution, the manifold references to “Gothic” and more in general medieval artistic and literary practices in Dada as well as in adjoining historical avant-garde formations may indicate that the Middle Ages were not – at least in the perspective of the Dadaists and other avant-garde artists and writers – the “dark” contrast and opposite of their modernist endeavours, but a major template, yet with two fundamental reservations to be made.

First of all, it should be noted that medievalism was not a specific avant-garde trait in the early twentieth century. It was rather part of a more general medievalism, not only in what might be called German Gothicism, but also in different contexts, in particular national constellations, often with different focuses and accents, e.g. architecturally or artistically with a preference for Romanic or Byzantine medieval samples, that could and did serve virtually any direction in contemporary culture. As such, the *Bauhütte* was not just serving as an orientation for the Bauhaus or for Dadaist and Constructivist “monumental construction”. It can be found also in the name of a conservative German architecture periodical, *Deutsche Bauhütte. Zeitschrift für alle Zweige praktischer Baukunst* (1897-1942). In the case of mysticism, the situation was similar.

In the second place, it should be noted that the perception of the Middle Ages and of medieval art and literature had only to a very limited extent a direct character and was by and large a mediated and filtered perception, based not on immediate access and study of the sources, but rather in a framed and (re-)narrated form, be it in translated anthologies or in contemporary studies of artistic reminiscences of a medieval provenance. Here, the perception and appropriation of – assumedly – medieval forms, imagery and practices did not really differ from the perception and appropriation of exotic sources, as in the case of African and Australian cult songs read in and sampled from the contributions of Catholic missionaries in the ethnographic journal *Anthropos*.

#### A LATER, BUT QUITE SIMILAR CASE : ASGER JORN'S "COMPARATIVE VANDALISM"

In conclusion, it should be clear that the proliferative recuperation and emulation of medieval artistic practices (or practices regarded as such) in Dada and related avant-garde ventures indicate that the Middle Ages were not primarily or exclusively a historical complex serving as a contrast and counterpart of the ambitions of the avant-garde, but rather a significant source of inspiration in positive terms. Whether Dada can be regarded as a paradigmatic case for the avant-garde as whole (or: to what extent), is a question rather for further research than for a conclusive answer here. It should be noted, though, that some obvious parallels can be found not only in contemporary avant-garde formations, but also in later avant-garde movements after the Second World War, often labelled as "neo-avant-garde". To point here at the role of the Middle Ages in just one neo-avant-garde conglomerate as a prospect on the way, in which the Middle Ages still served as a template and major orientation in more recent avant-garde movements, a look at Cobra and its continuation in the work of several Cobra artists in the Situationist International and its environs, most notably Asger Jorn, may serve as a sample for the enduring relevance of the Middle Ages as an avant-garde template.

In a similar way as in Surrealism or rather in a transformed shape, as Cobra had its roots partially in Surrealism, the art of the Cobra movement as the first avant-garde formation after the Second World War, continued in the same fantastic vein that linked Surrealism with the art of Hieronymus Bosch. Moreover, Cobra drew as well in its programmatic outline on the study *Homo Ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, first published in 1938 both in Dutch and in French translation as *Homo Ludens – Essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu*, in which the Middle Ages play an essential role.<sup>45</sup> In the work and in particular in artistic and aesthetic reflections and propositions of the Danish painter Asger Jorn, one of the founders of Cobra and in following years involved in the Situationist International and the Bauhaus imaginista, the Middle Ages play a quintessential reference and orientation in what he called “comparative vandalism”.

Vandalism in its common everyday meaning may stand for intentional damage and destruction. As such, in the case of Jorn, his practice to “modify” in particular existing paintings by other artists with a strong kitsch character by overpainting them can be seen as programmatic “strategic vandalism”<sup>46</sup>, in a way as a common avant-garde practice that can be found already decades before in the work of Marcel Duchamp, when he drew a moustache and a beard on the face of the *Mona Lisa*, presenting it as a new work of art entitled by him *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1920). Vandalism had, however, in the case of Jorn also another meaning, notably in the name of the so-called Skandinavisk institut for sammenlignende vandalisme (Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism), co-founded by him in 1961.

Here, “vandalism” did not refer to destruction or some form of modification, but rather to the Germanic people that gave the name to the term, coming from Northern Europe in the later days of the Roman Empire and settling in Northern Africa after its collapse, more or less at the start of the Middle Ages. Whereas meanwhile archaeological

<sup>45</sup> Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, Haarlem, Tjeenk Willink, 1938, then translated into French as *Homo Ludens. Essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1938.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Heil, Axel, Ohrt, Roberto (éd.), *Strategic Vandalism. The Legacy of Asger Jorn's Modification Paintings*, New York Petzel Gallery, 2020.

research locates the original settlement area in what is nowadays Central- and Eastern Poland and Slovakia, it was still in the days of Jorn a common assumption that the Vandals came from Scandinavia, where the period before the Viking age is often referred to, in Swedish still common, as the Vendel period. The reference to the Vandals as an originally Scandinavian tribe, could also be found in the official Latin title of the Swedish king from the sixteenth century until 1973 : *Suecorum, Gothorum et Vandalorum Rex* – “King of Swedes, Goths and Vandals”. As blurred as the notion “Vandals” was in Swedish and in Danish alike, where the kings also were referred to as *Rex Vandalorum*, Jorn used the term as an overarching label for both prehistoric and medieval art from the Nordic countries and their impact on (as he thought) and correlation with artistic practices throughout Western and Southern Europe – throughout the Middle Ages, but also including both earlier prehistoric and later popular art and artefacts, which he documented in a vast photography project resulting in some twenty thousand photos Jorn made together with the photographer Gérard Franceschi to prove in a comparative way stylistic-formal kinships, also e.g. in the use of ornaments and imagery that could be found in medieval churches on the Swedish island of Gotland as well as in e.g. France.<sup>47</sup> Whereas Jorn’s “comparative vandalism” with a scientific aura, yet rather an anticipation of what today is called “artistic research”, may seem far away from the artistic practices of Cobra and even more of the Situationist International, in fact several of the findings from his vandalism project can be found in publications of Situationist International and its environs, like the Bauhaus imaginista, e.g. in the journal *Situationist Times* (1962-1967).<sup>48</sup>

The kinship between Jorn’s “Vandals” and the Dada “Gothics” might be evident and clearly suggests the continuing relevance of the Middle Ages as a source of inspiration and template in the twentieth-century

47 Andersen, Troels, Nyholm Tove, *Asger Jorn og 10.000 års Nordisk folkekunst*. Silkeborg, Kunstmuseums Forlag, 1995.

48 In digitized form to found in the Monoskop portal. URL: [https://monoskop.org/Situationist\\_Times](https://monoskop.org/Situationist_Times), accessed 22/06/2023. A book publication in the same setting with a similar focus was *La Langue verte et la cuite, étude gastrophonique sur la marmythologie musiculinaire* by Jorn and Noël Arnaud (Paris, Pauvert, 1968); a book by Jorn combining Cobra with medieval and prehistoric imagery anticipating his comparative vandalism *Guldborn og lykkehjul. Les Cornes d'or et la roue de la fortune*, København, Selandia, 1957.

artistic avant-garde, not only in the early twentieth century, but also after the Second World War – far more profound and substantial than the marginality or even absence of the Middle Ages in current-day avant-garde studies seem to imply.

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