

**Theses of PhD Dissertation**

**Avant-garde and a Constructive Approach  
Ars Poeticas of Lajos Kassák**

Péter Suhajda

Supervisor: Dr. István Dobos



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

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## 1. Antecedents of the PhD dissertation, objectives and defining the topic

One of the most important theoretical bases of art considered to be Avant-garde, since its Futuristic beginnings, has always been “Dynamism”.

Its expression, on the one hand, technically, occurred through the irregular ways of creating the pieces, and thus in the pursuit of novel methods, while on the other, it meant the conscious and strict refusal, negation or overwriting of traditional notions. Avant-garde programs, manifestos as well as ars poeticas gave a theoretical background to such endeavors.

The ideological texts of Lajos Kassák are mostly in the centre and analysis of this thesis, as well as parts of texts with ideological significance. Manifestos, programs, studies, reviews and essays, as well as a few literary texts (both prose and poetry) written by the author belong to such corpus.

Throughout their interpretation, the history of “Kassákism” can clearly be outlined.

“Constructivism” of Kassák, due to its intentionally dynamic character, cannot be described completely through the stylistic or methodological features of neither one of the “historical” Avant-garde movements. Although different Isms have their more or less definable style marks and modes of expression, the main message of avant-garde way of thinking is in its unrestrictedness and the metamorphosis of the process of creation. Accordingly, Lajos Kassák continuously, until the very end would develop and form his art – it can be found in his ideological works. His ars poetica he extended into a “Constructive Approach” throughout the years, in a way that he preserved elements that he had considered symbolic in his multifaceted activities since his childhood. Segments from his long career between 1910 and 1930 can be remarkable concerning the topic, among other, earlier or later periods of his life.

It is necessary, therefore, to examine generally known, recognized and “canonized” works of Kassák – *Éposz Wagner maszkjában* (Epic in Wagner’s Mask), *A ló meghal és a madarak kiröpülnek* (The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away), *Számozott költemények* (Numbered Poems), *Mesteremberek* (Craftsmen), *Egy ember élete* (A Man’s Life), etc. – as well as his ideological writings, ars poeticas and especially his essays from the 1930s. These they might cast a light upon art forms considered to be Avant-garde. Moreover, they may as well modulate some seemingly general, or sometimes even contradictory notions used in their categorization.

In the past few years, the following researches have been present concerning the activities of Kassák:

- a) researching his journals – *A Tett* (The Action), *Ma* (Today), *Dokumentum* (Document), *Munka* (Work) – and their international partnerships, as well as the extensive connections of Avant-garde endeavors. It is important to mention at this point the activities of the colleagues at Lajos Kassák Museum both as exhibition organizers and researchers: especially the summarizing publication *Művészet akcióban* (Art in Action), edited by Eszter Balázs, Edit Sasvári and Pál Szeredi Merse, available in Hungarian and in English, related to the memorial exhibition organized by Petőfi Literary Museum and Lajos Kassák Museum in 2017;
- b) provision of comprehensive resources, such as the website *digiphil.hu* made by Petőfi Literary Museum and the Institute for Literary Studies of Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where copies of the journal *A Tett* are available in a digital form, among others; the website of Lajos Kassák Museum, where the complete text of *A ló meghal...* is available with countless hyperlinks and literary guest texts, edited by Pál Szeredi Merse;
- c) foreign (Viennese, German, Italian and other) references at the era of Kassák (Pál Deréky, Endre Szkárósi, Éva Forgács and staff at Lajos Kassák Museum);
- d) international relations – most importantly, researches of “Centre and Periphery” concerning “Avant-garde of the world”, out of which an exemplary work is *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, edited by Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, with an article concerning a Hungarian topic by Éva Forgács);
- e) mediality, earlier the *Újraolvasó's* (Rereader's) series book on Kassák, as a side-topic by a few younger authors;
- f) politics, society, character, charisma, etc. (Éva Ständeisky, Emőke G. Komoróczy);
- g) Kassák's influence in the second half of the twentieth century and today (János Fajó, Magyar Műhely, Emőke G. Komoróczy, Endre Szkárósi, contemporary artists).

Unfortunately, the different fields do not always cover completely the direction of the dissertation due to their specific aspects, but they are definitely connected to it. A few examples:

- a) the artist-editor would always eliminate and then restart his various journals, with the definite intention of renewal, which is the nature of the dynamic Kassák-perspective;
- b) questions of mediality were always a concern for the artist, who kept searching for the latest and most recent forms of expression;

- c) desemiotization, as an essential expectation of the ideological texts and ars poeticas by Kassák, as well as the criterion of self identity, in favorable cases, had vast societal and political consequences;
- d) the impact on posterity is perhaps the most important aspect in the discourse of the dissertation – one of the most characteristic “invariables” of Kassák, i.e. the never-changing expectation of always-changing manifestations, the novelty of the all-time author, through which it gains self-identity.

In the essays and other texts mentioned in the dissertation, this aspiration seems even more important in the works of Kassák and his followers than classifiability. The peculiar perspective of the artist manifesting the theorem is neither chronological, nor linear or historical. His activity can hardly be categorized by Isms or schools.

## 2. Outlining methodology

The principle of the expectation of novelty appears in several writings by different genres or topics of Kassák (it can be “deciphered”), and therefore sampling from different fields of the oeuvre may be successful. The approach might seem fractional, as it deliberately lacks the strict homogeneity of genres and styles. However, this was typical for the artists considered to be Avant-garde themselves as well: in all their creations, they were fond of using the tool of Montage and Collage.

Therefore, any such interpretational attempt, whose methods are somehow similar to the creational procedures of the artists to be analyzed, may turn out to be productive. As works of art considered to be Avant-garde scarcely remain within their textual (genre, style) framework, and would often touch upon other artistic, professional or even scientific fields, such as Sociology or Political Science, their analyses should follow suit and be open, overlooking the space and timeframe of canonized movements.

However, this dissertation cannot be understood as a monograph, but rather as an attempt, or a series of attempts to understand the Avant-garde way of thinking.

Chapters of the dissertation are organized by the principles of Montage at times, despite the fact that they follow a chronology based on the changing concept of Kassák. Nonetheless, throughout almost the whole discourse, several pieces from different fields of the oeuvre reappear: *Képarchitektúra-kiáltvány* (Manifesto of Picture-Architecture), *A korszerű művészet él* (Modern Art is Alive), *A ló meghal...*, etc. among certain motives (the figure of the craftsman,

architectural references, etc.). Evoking the mathematical wording of Constructivism, such character traits could be called “the greatest common divisor”, as they are methods or poetic tools, mostly metaphors and toposes, that kept reappearing in each period of Kassák, regardless their metamorphoses. Their aim is to provide strong-points when answering new or re-emerging questions or solving problems.

### 3. Thesis-like list of new scientific findings of the dissertation

The dissertation contains thirteen greater units (*Preface*, eleven intermediary chapters, *Conclusion*).

The introductory part (*Preface*, or “*Advance Guard*” of an *Interpretational Attempt*) deals with the more essential questions and problems: by content, it equals to the earlier parts of the Theses.

Chapter One (“*Problematic*” *Avant-garde*) aims to present the general, characteristic features of the complexity of *Avant-garde*. Identification, or rather disidentification, and manifestations of estrangeness; relation to tradition and time in general; the nature and the principles of first person plural (chorus); performative language use and the tool of desemiologization; and finally, a method in contrast with the previous one, the “overusage” of signs can all be called peculiar *Avant-garde* style marks.

It seems inevitable to compare the phenomenon with “surrounding” styles, as it is referred to as the metaphor of the “Fourth Musketeer” in the essay, as well as its predecessors – especially with the great artistic period of the nineteenth century, Romanticism. Examining the aforementioned characteristics does not only help understand “*Avant-garde*”, but it may also call attention to its contradictions as well.

The three following parts point out examples from the world of Kassák, based on the characteristics mentioned earlier.

Chapter Two (*On the Battlefield of Tradition and Innovation*) intends to analyse a cycle of poems from the early stage of the oeuvre that is considered to be rather transitional (*Éposz Wagner maszkjában*). It considers essentially important those tendencies of the text where signs of “overusage” can be detected, whilst it follows looking for the traces of *Avant-garde* from Romanticism, as well as the subject of performative language use.

Chapter Three (*Text and Picture-Architecture*) analyses a Constructivistic manifesto (*Képarchitektúra-kiáltvány*) from the heydays of Hungarian *Avant-garde*, addressing not the

image, but rather its manifesto instead. It is also based on the demonstration of the “overusage” of signs, where the problem of desemiotization comes into play as well.

Chapter Four (*The [incommunicable?] History of Isms*) intends to understand a late, cumulative work, *Az izmusok története* (The History of Isms), which looks back on the period of “historical” Avant-garde from decades later. Nonetheless, it is questionable whether theories of Avant-garde nature concerning the future (and its continuous revelation) may create any history of Isms with clearly defined boundaries. The text of Kassák is very much fractured, and it is not based on the history of movements, but it rather sorts out based on different aspects, with periodicals of Kassák in the centre. The piece is an interesting example of the “overuse” of signs, which prevents the construction of meanings.

Chapter Five (*The Rhetoric of Constructivism*) is practically the summary of the previous chapters, as well as the starting point of the followings. The phenomenon used by Kassák as well, “Constructive Approach” is introduced here. One of the most important characteristics of Avant-garde texts with the intention of desemiotization is their “rhetoric” nature, which, according to some texts, reaches its symbolic climax through the figure of tautology.

The three following parts deal with desemiotization, or more accurately and in a broader sense, artistic self-identity in the works of Kassák.

Chapter Six (*Picture-Architecture and Text*) postulates the manifest that appears in its title, but it extends its scope to the general views of Kassák concerning art, as well as their “intellectual” context. In the ideological declarations of the author, in his explications concerning the “Constructive Approach”, the self-identical piece is always novel, and the artistic way dynamically changing, opposed to the unchangeable, static one. Searching and experimenting is definitely an activity dealing with the future, whose creation, yet unknown, while the past is already known, with its closed elements as well as their imitations.

It appears that (Neo-)Avant-garde artists of the second half of the twentieth century were and have been dealing with such rhetoric of Kassák, for whom the most important principle has been the innovating and experimenting role of Avant-garde. The focus of their attention is the expectations braced by Kassák, and they claim themselves part of the artistic process instead of the keepers or resuscitators of a tradition.

Chapter Seven (*Involving the Artist in the Tautologic Marking*) moves along the train of thought of the previous one. Text and artwork can only be self-identical if the piece equals its maker, detail for detail – according to Kassák, that is the material of the artwork, through which the artist forms himself or herself into the piece. In this sense, he appeared to have got into a discussion with Michelangelo from the Renaissance (*A korszerű művészet él*). The analysis

intends to think through such issues, and at the same time it casts light upon the fact that the author, contrary to his written principles, tended to create simplifying categories in order to support his claims.

Chapter Eight (*The Predecessors and Contemporaries of Lajos Kassák*) focuses on the impacts upon the artist, mainly through the “layers” of his essays. In these texts, a “real” reader speaks. The verbally made, “receptive narrator” tries to get close to the texts and their makers, by even fighting himself. This way, the conformity of text and artist is transient: the complete “success” of an artwork (and that of the artistic process), according to its renewed rhetoric, reaches its climax by the complete identification with the receptor.

It is definitely worth mentioning those authors that were under Kassák, “the receptor narrator’s” scrutiny throughout his long career. His texts on Sándor Petőfi are not only interesting because of his peculiar opinion concerning the poet, but they definitely tell a lot about his views concerning Romanticism. His Ady-image went through significant changes until the 1930s – essays about this topic very well signify such process. His essay concerning Kosztolányi also show an altering story. Maybe the most well-known one of his antagonisms is with Babits, thus by no mistake does it appear several times throughout the dissertation.

Chapter Nine (*Modern Art ≠ Aesthetic Culture*) talks about the dilemma of an earlier part, *Involving the Artist in the Tautologic Marking*, examining the issues at hand from a different perspective. The “pamphlet”, *A korszerű művészet él* plays an essential role in the oeuvre, as one of the most important ars poetica of the author that he considered exemplary until the end of his career. The aimed existence of an artist published (“declared”) by him is hard to reconcile with other, aesthetics-based artistic approaches popular in the era.

Chapter Ten (*Ars poetica formed into life?*) intends to outline Lajos Kassák’s short life as a freemason, based on research in the archives. The biographical diversion can be completely inserted into the topic of the dissertation. The artist’s preliminary documents imply that his intention to join fits in the system of “Desemiotisation” manifested in his texts: as if he had tried them to “come into being” (make true) while in the society. A few poems support this claim, that he wrote at this period, and quite possibly can be adjoined to the century-long discourse of Freemasonry. Certain elements (architectural symbols, metaphor of the craftsman) are fairly close to the Constructivist motives of Kassák.

Chapter Eleven (*Following Avant-garde Dynamism*) also deals with the peculiarities of Avant-garde ways of thinking. It tries to find examples of the often mentioned Dynamism (or one of its synonyms or isotopes) in different movement manifestos, especially in the ideological

work of the Constructivists and Kassák. At the same time, it tries to enter into a dialogue with the previous chapters.

Defining, or at least describing the Avant-garde can only be successful if the deepest meanings of the metaphor are revealed, along with the variations of the interpretation of phenomena by all-time international interpreters. Thus its spacial and historical boundaries can be transferable and extendable, which may broaden the meaning of the phenomenon.

In case Kassák was canonized as an Avant-garde artist by his contemporaries and the posterity, it should also be taken into account what he thought about this category himself – and this way, how he saw the Avant-garde in his contemporaries as well as in previous authors.

*Conclusion* summarizes the main ideas of the essay, and it intends to give a basis for prospective future research as well.

Special elements of style listed in the first chapters of the essay, as well as the self-contradictions within lead us to the conclusion that the expression Avant-garde should be used with quotation marks or with complementary clarifications.

It cannot be taken for granted either that the phenomenon can be divided into two historical categories of the twentieth century (Historical and Neo-Avant-garde), as well as a few “canonized” movements. However, these latter ones obviously formed an identical part of the whole. Classification based on exclusivity rather has a counter-effect concerning the characteristics, which may lead to false conclusions in terms of the oeuvre of Kassák. It appears that in the 1910s and 1920s, the period of the Historical Avant-garde, Kassák did not consider himself an Avant-garde artist. He surely started to refer to his work that way later on, thus legitimizing it, and in a special and less scientific fashion, originated from the experimenting nature of the Avant-garde. By then, however, the era of the Isms had long been over.

Although by professional considerations, it is possible to categorize works as “transitional-”, “genuine-” and “beyond-” Avant-garde, but the (imagined) responses of authors to such categorizations may not be that unequivocal. The late interpretation of the phenomenon by Kassák, due to its experimenting nature, broadens the spectacles that can be understood as Avant-garde, and therefore it is worth using the word among quotation marks or with amendments (“-like”, “-type”, “-named”).

Constructive Approach, also referred to by Kassák, appears to be broad enough to be the collective for historical unity in terms of the various movements as well as of general principles. To be precise, referring not to the Avant-garde as a whole, but to its Kassákian “surface”. He set out his *ars poetica* early in his career, and it lasted for decades, went through numerous

transitions. It was not devoid of realistic or ideological debates, and it would even transgress artistic manifestations, placing itself into real dimensions of the author's life. Experts discussing the topic sometimes claim to define at the beginning of their work what they mean by the term Avant-garde. It definitely shows that there is uncertainty in the discourse, and it might be due to the aspiration for clarity. Per Bäckström (see the detailed references of his quoted text in the essay), in order to make the term more clearly definable, argues with constricting tendencies, and geographically broadens the interpretational possibilities instead. Besides the Anglo-American and German scientific sections, he claims *raison d'être* to Neo-Latin (Italian) and other observations as well. In the broader sense of the phenomenon, even the oeuvre of Kassák may get a more positive meaning, whilst the "historical-" and "neo-" tendencies may cast new light upon the subject.

However, such opening is worth to be taken towards the past of the word, through which its centennial existence becomes (at least) a bicentennial intellectual and pragmatical process. The expression introduced by Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (for details, see the essay) gives a fixed meaning to the metaphor, which in case refers to the leading role of the artists in societal changes, it gains further shades of meaning for the phenomenon, which may be unconsciously self-evident for "historical" "Avant-gardes". In the Saint-simonian sense, Petőfi could also be Avant-garde – or, as a matter of fact, any artist, whose words or work is intended to turn its performative power for the amelioration of humanity. Kassák expresses such views, in all field and periods of his oeuvre: in his transitional or real Avant-garde poetry, essays written in the thirties, organization of the Munka-kör (Munka [Work] Circle) or his endeavors as a freemason, not to forget his everyday actions – nonetheless, he only considered himself or his reviews part of the Avant-garde.

As if all the artists considered to be Avant-garde or who identified themselves with the phenomenon from Saint-Simon, including Kassák, would reflect to their own work without even mentioning the term (or very little), and interpret their activities under the territories of other Isms with a more narrow spectrum of meaning. Not only did they create pieces of art in various forms of art, but they also established their ideological background in manifestos or texts that apply the performative elements of manifestos.

Key general conclusions of the essay:

- a) it is worth examining the phenomenon of the Avant-garde besides its historical, twentieth century categories in a broader spectrum;

- b) the need for the geographical (topographical) extension of scientific explanations are justified by international research;
- c) the real history of Avant-garde started almost one hundred years before the appearance of “historical Avant-garde groups”;
- d) this makes it unavoidable to compare the phenomenon with other periods and styles that, according to its rhetoric, it opposes;
- e) it seems especially worth studying its stance towards Romanticism, which seems definitely more complex than simply negating it;
- f) re-framing spacial and time “horizons” may shape the understanding of certain “Avant-garde” oeuvres;
- g) the “Avant-garde” nature of the Kassák-oeuvre shows various patterns, depending on a more narrow or broader observational focus;
- h) intentional “changes” made the art of Kassák more “dynamic”, while several elements turned out to be permanent throughout his artistic career;
- i) the categorization of all these depends on the observational focus mentioned above.



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PhD Publication List

Candidate: Péter Suhajda

Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Suhajda, P.:** Kassák tényleges és szimbolikus szabadkőművessége.  
In: A Kassák-kód. Szerk.: Juhász R. József, H. Nagy Péter, Szlovákiai Magyar Írók  
Társasága, Pozsony, 108-114, 2008. ISBN: 9788096987917

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2. **Suhajda, P.:** Korszerű művészet - Esztétikai kultúra (A vitázó Kassák).  
*Alföld.* 71 (11), 60-69, 2020. ISSN: 0401-3174.
3. **Suhajda, P.:** Változatok a kassáki deszemiotizációra.  
*Alföld.* 69 (12), 46-53, 2018. ISSN: 0401-3174.
4. **Suhajda, P.:** A hiány szervező rendje: kísérletező kedv és avantgárd technikák.  
*Parnasszus.* 14 (3), 55-59, 2008. ISSN: 1219-3275.
5. **Suhajda, P.:** A konstruktivizmus retorikája.  
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6. **Suhajda, P.:** Kassák Lajos tényleges és szimbolikus szabadkőművessége.  
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10. **Suhajda, P.:** Petőfi Sándor szerepe a kassáki (ön)értelmezésben.  
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14. **Suhajda, P.:** A szöveg ábrázoló építményének jövői lebontása.  
*Szőrös kő.* 12 (3), 38-44, 2007. ISSN: 1335-6321.
15. **Suhajda, P.:** Az izmusok (elbeszélhetetlen?) története: Kassák Lajos: Az izmusok története.  
*Partitúra.* 1 (2), 135-143, 2006. ISSN: 1336-7307.

### List of other publications

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

16. **Suhajda, P.:** Kálmán C. György: Élharcok és arcélek. A korai magyar avantgárd költészet és a kánon.  
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17. **Suhajda, P.:** Halmazódó terek és idők szimultaneitása.  
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18. **Suhajda, P.:** "aki nem tudja elképzelni, legegyszerűbb, ha kipróbálja": Szkárosi Endre: Mi az, hogy avantgárd. Írások az avantgárd hagyománytörténetéből.  
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#### Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (1)

19. **Suhajda, P.:** Tükrözés és tükröződés textualizációja és figurativitása: Dsida Jenő: Csend a tavon.  
*Szőrös kő.* 11 (3), 36-40, 2006. ISSN: 1335-6321.

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20. **Suhajda, P.:** Teljességigény és felelősség: Szigeti Lajos Sándor: Verssor(s)ok.  
*Új Horiz.* 34 (3), 189-191, 2006. ISSN: 0865-9583.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

