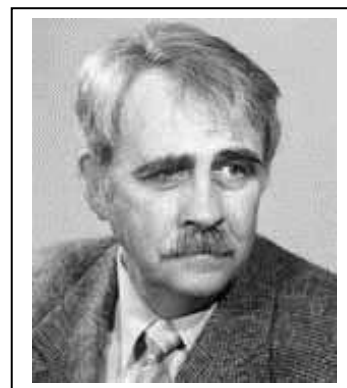


THE HEGEMONY OF "ISMS" ***AS FAILURE OF THE AVANT-GARDE*** ***WANDERING THROUGH THE REALM OF "ISMS"***

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ABSTRACT

The *ism* is like a cupola accommodating the various artistic trends and fundamental styles, or sheltering certain manners, all being related to the specificity of certain attitudes derived from the diverse aesthetic approaches. The *ism* groups, parcels out, catalogues and systematizes what in artistic practice is often difficult or even impossible to grasp. Viewed from the perspective of a desideratum, the *ism* can be nothing but a preconceived idea imposed a priori upon an aesthetic attitude. Hence, a confusing reversal of values occurred right in the yard of those interested in the articulation of some systemic visions. Instead of being presented with the object of creation, we are presented with the tools with which the object was shaped. The negative spirit of the "anti" realm has shaped itself by tenaciously producing a series of aesthetic categories pompously called *anti-categories*. The fickleness of the taste governed by the subjective *we like* has insinuated itself legitimizing a genuine antimetaphoric mannerism. And from here to the opportunism of *it is in*, or *it is out*, born from the arbitrariness of the ephemeral fashion, there was only one step to go; as to fashion and its insinuation in art, we will leave that for some other occasion.



Keywords: the *ism* groups, style, aesthetic attitude, artistic expression

A few emblematic landmarks have been long adopted in stylistics defining groups of features that belong only to a certain cultural relevance. Called to define an aesthetic or artistic attitude or trend, these true models of a certain typology of expression find their notional justification in terminological forms that, though etymologically different, end in the same suffix *ism*.

Classicism, romanticism, symbolism, pointillism, dodecaphonism, serialism, impressionism, academicism, dogmatism, mannerism, naturalism, expressionism, dadaism, bruitism, verism, aleatorism, avant-gardism, constructivism and many others, are common terminology that we frequently use nowadays without bothering to explain.

We have taken the liberty to call this vast territory the *realm of isms* that, through a draconian rigor commonly imposed from outside areas - sometimes even peripheral to artistic expression -, have most often imposed a dictatorship of the techniques of expression to the

detriment of the naturalness of communication¹. The somewhat inflationary aspect of the proliferating phenomenon of *isms* in the cultural attitude of the late twentieth century compels us to dwell a little longer over them, for their unwanted presence was felt in all the modern arts.

The *ism* is like a cupola accommodating the various artistic trends and fundamental styles, or sheltering certain manners, all being related to the specificity of certain attitudes derived from the diverse aesthetic approaches. The *ism* groups, parcels out, catalogues and systematizes what in artistic practice is often difficult or even impossible to grasp. Viewed from the perspective of a desideratum, the *ism* can be nothing but a preconceived idea imposed a priori upon an aesthetic attitude. Hence, a confusing reversal of values occurred right in the yard of those interested in the articulation of some systemic visions.

Thus, the *Is*m as suffix of theoretical classifications has caused, ever since its appearance, more confusion than clarity. But what is worse, it has created a multitude of fixed and even prejudiced ideas. The *Is*m thus perceived is an argument for amateurs, a refuge for uncreative people and a tradition for the annoying insistence of the inept self-seekers.

This true labyrinth of *isms* generated the vanity of the stylistic **purism** by concealing the despair of the lost traveller in search of the light under the pompous grandiloquence of someone stubbornly stuck in some pseudo-certainties². Here again we witness the outburst of a conventional, arid and uncreative *academicism*.³

An academic style is nevertheless discernible in the various mannerisms of the school exercises and sketches prior to the development of a major aesthetic attitude, consubstantial with an explicitly assumed aesthetic attitude⁴

Catalogued as *aesthetic attitude*, *artistic style*, or, even less flatteringly, as *artistic manner*, style incorporates a multitude of nuances.

Thus the two basic styles, **Classicism** and **Romanticism**, are unequivocally labelled as *aesthetic attitudes*, in acknowledgement of their ability to interfere and especially to create multiple extrapolations, being somewhat unattached to any epoch or historical time. Viewed in the light of

¹ Especially in the case of all the mannerist typologies.

² I have never been fully convinced by those "erudites" of style always trying to mould you into their vision on *stylistic accuracy*. The arrogation to oneself of a vision limited by one's ability to grasp the phenomenon has always caused me grief, and the claimants of the pure stylism have fostered in me a genuine sense of compassion.

³ "Academicism - aesthetic attitude that promotes the unconditional imitation of Renaissance or ancient art; it cultivates an ideal of conventional art in the light of some canonized norms, conformism". Although called aesthetic attitude, it preserves in our view the aforementioned rigidity, thereby earning the attribute of mere mannerism; marked conventionally in the dictionary definition, it fully justifies our present annotation.

⁴ "Academic style - manner in art in which the subject is treated like the studies and exercises in an art school (academy); correct, but conventional style".

these fundamental aesthetic attitudes, the great artistic styles display, respectively, subtle nuances of classicism and romanticism¹.

Classicism has become a fundamental style by virtue of a constant *aesthetic attitude* that radiates balance, confidence and a standard of perfection²

Located somewhat at the antipode, *Romanticism* is marked by the weight of the emotional factor, whose shifts between lyrical and meditative, or tragic and dramatic, shape another type of *aesthetic attitude*³ Without underestimating the relevance of the great artistic styles, we wish to emphasize that they depend on the historical period in which they occurred, being sometimes also products of these periods. Most artistic styles are associated with a well-established historical time. Thus, we recall the mediaeval Gothic style⁴, the Renaissance⁵ and the Baroque,⁶ then the pre-classical Rococo⁷ with its obvious pre-Romantic or at times even Neoclassical tones, followed by Impressionism⁸ and Expressionism⁹, emerged from the continual feud between Classicism and Romanticism. Each of these styles could become strong arguments in this regard.

¹ Let us remember the Greek classicism or the annotations classic of Romanticism, classic of Impressionism, or Pre-Classicism, Post-Romanticism etc.

²“Classicism - aesthetic attitude characterized by a tendency to observe phenomena in the light of the universal and to knit together the elements of the beautiful, into a stable, harmonious and well-balanced system, according to certain rationally inferred norms. Classic – that serves as a standard of perfection”.

³Romanticism - fundamental aesthetic attitude characterized by the tendency to evoke the world in terms of its fundamental and concrete aspects, opposing the individual and the historical fact to the eternal and abstract types of the Classicism, by asserting the primacy of the emotional factor over the rational one, of imagination over observation, by exacerbating sensitivity (religiosity, melancholy, the feeling of nature), subjectivity and spontaneity through a propensity for evasion in dreams, in the exotic, in the past”

It infused the lyricism of the epic and dramatic genre. Tragic-comic, sublime and grotesque ... the popular natural language loaded with emotional weight...

⁴ Artistic style born in the 12th century almost simultaneously in France and Germany starting from the sober forms derived from the earlier Romanesque style, then turned into exuberance through the ornamentation of the ogives one might speak of an overall elegance of all the decorative elements of the time... " (Dicționar de Estetică Generală, Ed. Politică, Bucharest, 1972)

⁵ „Period in European history, including roughly the 14th through the 16th centuries ..(.....) the Renaissance glorified culture, the humanist studies as a means of man’s ennoblement and accomplishment, created the ideal of a multilateral development of personality, of the universal man.....” (Dicționar Enciclopedic- vol. VI, Bucharest 2006)

⁶Baroque - "Artistic style that developed in Catholic Europe as an art of the counter reform. Taste for colossal grandeur, grandeur, often using curves, exuberant decoration. Sculpture: dynamic compositions achieved by means of multiple axis techniques. Painting: diagonal arrangements, swirl painting, perspectival effects. Elaborate, rhetorical, excessively ornamented style”

⁷ „Rococo - style in 18th century European art following the Baroque style and preceding the Neoclassical style. Gallant, bucolic and frivolous topics, preference for light and bright colours. Asymmetrical composition, picturesque and refinement. Obsolete and slightly ridiculous” (Dicționar enciclopedic, vol VI, Bucharest, 2006)

⁸ „Artistic movement born in France in the 8th decade of the 19th century..”(Dicționar enciclopedic, vol III, Bucharest 1999). The same dictionary indicates that on a theoretical level impressionism can be extrapolated towards the concept of aesthetic attitude! „Artistic trend that marked the end of the last century in reaction to academicism and naturalism, whose object in fine arts and music was the detection and direct evocation of the fugitive impressions evoked by the artist” (Dicționar de Estetică Generală, Ed. Politică, Bucharest, 1972).

⁹ “Modern artistic movement born in Germany in the early 20th century, which gained universal resonance. Its aesthetic credo can be summarized in the following principles: 1 art = an expression of the self, focused on the inner emotional tension 2 the positive value aspired to is the absolute, 3 promotion of creativity, tendency towards developing synthetic forms through essentialization and abstraction, 4 interest in archaic cultures, mediaeval Gothic, exotic and irrational, 5 nonconformist social attitude ...” (Dicționar de Estetică Generală, Ed. Politică Bucharest, 1972)

On a certain hierarchy of values, the *fundamental aesthetic attitude* will certainly rank first, being followed by **style** as **artistic trend**, while *manner* remains somewhere outside the "stylistic sacredness". Born from contemptuous pejoration, **mannerism** humbly carries its due image all the way long.

Mannerism as a consequence of an artificial and unnatural rhetoric, will place the artistic discourse in a stylistic anteroom, as if in disguise¹. While rigorously spreading about expressive means specific to other stylistic geographies, mannerism implements them into the daily life with a tenacity worthy of a better cause.

We mentioned earlier that our cultural present is sometimes subject to *standardization*, to integration into *patterns*, or into various *-isms*, but this in no way makes it a time of confusion. Rather, our time is one of a pragmatic rationalism dictated by the acceptance of certain whims of the social game. It is one facet of this flawed consumer society that feeds on heavily and skilfully advertised products. In this regard, the artistic creation too can become a commodity to be provided through typical market economy mechanisms. The better articulated the advertising of an artistic creation is on media channels, the deeper it will be embedded in the mind of the public (regardless of its intrinsic qualities). In this regard, we can hardly speak of a potential aesthetic vision, let alone of a particular ideational agenda.

Polystylism, this last twitch of the arid quests for something *different at any cost*, remains on the panoply of *isms* under the "category of remains". The natural question nevertheless arises as to whether a chaotic stylistic jumble in "potpourri" or perhaps just "collage" style deserves this level of attention. But the fuss made in support of its accreditation both as an original solution and as a stylistically innovative expression is surprising by its unsubstantial argumentation. This mannerism of dissociations reminding of the society games played on the impromptu stage of an eternal masked ball, intentionally abandons the authenticity of a stylistic rhetoric and boldly approaches heterogeneous and more or less masterful artistic expressions.

At the level of major stylistics, where we are fully detached from all the epigonist mannerist obsessions, polystylism does not exist or, more exactly, it cannot exist at the level of theoretical syntheses. A style is defined in its uniqueness, from where it could possibly be extrapolated, or involved in the whirl of certain subtle interferences, but in no way could it be the object of heterogeneous mixtures like these simplistic "promenade" mannerisms. Polystylism remains, to the

¹ „Mannerism-lack of naturalness, affectation, artificiality. Term used to refer either to the copying or eclectic combination of means of expression of one or more artists, or to the reproduction of one's own artistic techniques" (Dicționar enciclopedic, vol IV, Bucharest, 2001). „The tendency of an artist or of an entire generation of artists to copy, imitate or combine the means of expression of others or to repeatedly reproduce their own" (Dicționar de Estetică Generală, Ed. Politică, Bucharest, 1972)

disappointment of its promoters, a mascot of those who lack the rectitude to appear as they are, or worse, lack the necessary aplomb to use natural artistic expressions.

We conclude with a brief discussion about the individual style and its superior value as we perceive it today in the context of classicism and romanticism, with the belief that no preliminary clarifications will be required for the time being.

Classicism and *Romanticism* are stylistic stages well established in time, whose forms of expression are somehow *petrified* in the social consciousness. In this context, we also have a clear image of the *individual styles* that time memory has filtered and preserved in a relative eternity. A key element in this process of value formation was the embracement of a certain taste that evolved and changed visibly from one generation to another.

A slightly rhetorical question arises in this context, in sign of confusion: could post-modernity be defined stylistically?.....

we believe not, as for the moment it remains a collection of different *manners of expression* that has not yet found the umbrella of that defining *ism* that the aforementioned great styles have.

The Avant-Garde

Under the Sign of an Unsought Arriere-Garde

As an aesthetic orientation, avant-gardism represented initially the option for the radical innovative solutions that aimed at breaking the canons of artistic tradition by seeking newness at any cost and on all possible levels. Regarding from the start any pre-avant-garde means of artistic expression as obsolete, the avant-garde boldly and brashly adopts the psychology of the explorer in search of something whose appearance could be at best presumed. By inventing new means of expression, avant-gardists have stimulated the emergence of schools populated by the dull epigonism of apprentices who, while diligently imitating their masters, end up shedding some flagrant mannerisms. And thus, from an acclaimed avant-garde the artistic movement falls into an unsought arriere-garde.

The victims of this stubbornly innovative mannerism cannot yet be comforted through "tactical withdrawals" so pretentiously defined by attributive prefixes like *neo-*, *poly-*, *anti-* or others of the like. The courses, seminars and symposia on new art have achieved nothing but a systematic literacy program for its integration in the rigid laws of some mannerist expressions. The models offered by the "sacred monsters" of certain artistic expressions, once acquired as habits, are multiplied with the same docility with which one accepts the whims of fashion that are adopted in the social game with more or less conviction.

Never before have we perceived a greater mannerist academicism than in this ambiguous and heteroclitic artistic context. The academicism of innovation at any cost succumbs spectacularly on the shore of an ineptly rigid mannerism!

And then the avant-gardism outlined by this set of mannerist formulas paradoxically becomes an unpleasant, though effective *arriere-garde*.

The despair in the face of this lamentable failure deepens by the day, especially when the innovative extra-, meta- or poly-stylistic solutions have long been exhausted. Thus, the creator "baptized" in the spirit of the avant-garde finds himself abandoned by his own fathers, fighting for their own survival. Lost in the jungle of the free will and driven by the logic of some extra-artistic grammars, these guides confusedly and less and less convincingly lead those who are still naïve enough to follow them.

Moving steadily against the natural flow, further and further away from the target albeit convinced that you are the explorer of some new worlds, remains, however, an example of unparalleled tenacity.

Consistency in itself is a quality, as is tenacity in pursuing a creed, but the cowardice not to admit that you were wrong in your belief, the impudence or nerve to keep on promoting it at the expense of those who still give credit to your words is a piece of utter dishonesty and crass immorality.

The promoters of this *arriere-garde*¹ should be forgiven, for the punishment for their imminent failure is the payment for the recklessness with which they have knowingly put themselves in the service of the negative spirit.

Without looking for verdicts and much less for explanations, we shall now attempt to make one last observation on this desperate dialogue with nothingness. A creator's effort to engage in such a dialogue can be likened to Sisyphus's proverbial labours. This might be the greatest punishment for the generations of avant-garde post-modernism whose substantial inconsistency turned it into an apodictic and well-deserved *arriere-garde*. A painful or even tragic separation² of the intellect from the affect, of thought from feeling, has invaded the realm that today is more and more ashamed to claim kinship with the beautiful³.

¹ more and more commonly called modernism or contemporary art, subtly avoiding the old name of avant-gardism.

² A true "separation from childhood" so pithily described by someone; and if we were to believe the saying *children and fools speak the truth* then the present image receives its true dimension (and we, the few, no longer children, accept humbly but with dignity the status of fools).

³ Thus was born a pseudo-aesthetic theory of the ugly, which even by the decent denotation of aesthetic anti-category humbly confesses this lamentable failure both in terms of thinking and, especially, in terms of ethical attitude.

When developing a system of thought in terms of *the things you assert to exist*, it is nonsense trying to find place for the definition of the things that you know that *do not exist*; considering that the aesthetic categories are attributive-affirmative, they cannot ethically be associated with an anti type of awareness!

Instead of being presented with the object of creation, we are presented with the tools with which the object was shaped. The negative spirit of the "anti" realm has shaped itself by tenaciously producing a series of aesthetic categories pompously called *anti-categories*. The fickleness of the taste governed by the subjective *we like* has insinuated itself legitimizing a genuine antimetaphoric mannerism. And from here to the opportunism of *it is in*, or *it is out*, born from the arbitrariness of the ephemeral fashion, there was only one step to go; as to fashion and its insinuation in art, we will leave that for some other occasion.