Guillaume Apollinaire's Influence on Rastko Petrović's Reflections about the Truth in Artistic Creation

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1. Introduction

Guillaume Apollinaire's thoughts concerning the aesthetics of visual arts appeared in a specific artistic milieu, which was established in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. In the cultural capital of Europe, numerous exhibitions, poetic soirees and concerts were organized by promising young artists who would soon afterwards leave a considerable mark in the art history and become part of painters' and poets' elite. Among them were yet unknown, but rising artists like Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalì, Jean Cocteau and others, and also a poet and tireless art critic named Guillaume Appolinaire, who actively took part in introducing a "new spirit of the times" (in French "l'esprit nouveau"), as he prophetically called the new atmosphere in Parisian artistic circles. In this epoch artists turned to the idea that a piece of art is, in a certain sense, multi-faceted and has syncretic character. In other words, it allows that aesthetics of different arts permeate each other. Therefore it is understandable that poets and novelists were showing great interest in plastic arts getting to the point that they endeavoured to adopt principles of those arts in their poems or other literary creations[1]. That is to say that the aesthetic of visual i.e. figurative arts in general has been considerably transformed (it was noticeable that new art had tendency to be dissociated from the mimetic principle), which was encouraging for other artists (poets, musicians, dancers) to leave rigid traditional forms of expression and/or replace them with some new ones, much more innovative, much more courageous. Generally speaking, art at the beginning of the twentieth century was in a process of mutation, turning to a new direction, which implied increased freedom of artistic expression.

2. New sources of inspiration

This boundlessness of artistic expression, as a basis for the aesthetic of the "new art" ("l'art nouveau"), has been taken from the aesthetic of black African

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[1] For further information about integration of visual elements into poetry in general see Rousset 1990, Vouilloux 1995, and for particular cases of Apollinaire's poems see Popović 2006 and also Popović 2007.

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plastic ("la plastique nègre" or "la plastique africaine") (Popović 2015: 700–701)[2]. In the first decade of the twentieth century audience of Paris enthusiastically accepted artefacts originated in Oceania, discovering their perfect clarity of expression. Parisian supporters of the "new art" considered that a way toward pure artistic expression and artistic truth has to go through a serious analysis of complex internal relations existing in a piece of art itself. In other words, that complex process requires a mental effort (such as decomposition of artistic elements before approaching to a piece of art as a whole unit) in order to comprehend the idea of the artistic truth. Actually, the "new art" was on the way to abstraction.

Apollinaire's thoughts about the aesthetic of visual arts were soon spread in Parisian circles, and also were deeply admired by a wide group of poets and artists. Among many of his contemporary admirers who were more or less influenced by his ideas, was the Serbian poet, novel writer and art critic Rastko Petrović[3], whose aesthetic positions and artistic criteria were formed in Parisian artists' milieu. We find that Apollinaire's reflections about the value of African art became a basis for Petrović's critical essays on art as well as for his literary writing. However, although close to Apollinaire's standpoint (Trifunović 1989: 121), a "French student" Rastko Petrović mostly varies and widens it, and partially differs from it, such as when he considers the question of truth in the artistic work.

3. Artistic truth and reality

For an artist, the relation between artistic truth and reality is one of main issues, because it determines how the artefact would be understood and/or interpreted. Apollinaire attaches great importance to this question in his major essay *Les peintres cubistes: méditations esthétiques*, published in 1913, where he analyses painting and sculpture. Apollinaire's contemplations on the issue are concise and correspond with other questions on art.

In Apollinaire's opinion the painting can be compared to the fire (Apollinaire's "flamme"), that important human invention which has been considered by philosophers of Ancient Greece as an active principle – the principle of life. So, Apollinaire points out that the fire could be taken as a symbol of painting

[2] Apollinaire was well informed about black African art. The manuscripts that are in National Library of Paris contain information that he wanted to write a book under the title *L'art chez les sauvages*, but it didn't happen. Importance that Apollinaire attached to the art of Africa and Oceania was indisputable. In his essays and articles he claims that their creations are considerable, worth occupying a special place in the history of "new art", especially in the case of cubism. Their influence is obvious even in Apollinaire's poetry. For example, he adopts this aesthetic in his famous poem *Zone* (from collection *Alcools*) or in *Les soupirs du servant de Dakar* (from collection *Calligrammes*). Besides, many of literary critics consider Apollinaire as one of the first collectors of black African artefacts and one of the first critics of them (See in Apollinaire 1999).

[3] Rastko Petrović (1898–1949) was a great Serbian novelist, lyric poet, literary and art critic and also diplomat. After his service in the Serbian army during the World War I and dramatic retreat through Albania in 1915, he went to France, firstly to college in Nice, then to Paris to study law, literature and the history of art. During his stay in Paris, he met Apollinaire, Picasso and other modernists. After graduation in 1920, he returned to Serbia and entered the diplomatic service. As a writer, he was one of the pioneers of Serbian modernism: he supported new trends in novel writing, in poetry (surrealism), in painting (constructivism and new realism) and became an influential art critic.

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and visual arts, because the fire has its "purity, unity and truth", the same three "virtues" that appear in a painted work (Apollinaire 1991: 5). The author further explains that people in the ancient times esteemed fire; they were irresistibly attracted by the light that fire supplies (Apollinaire 1991: 18), and the light is mainly what painters are looking for. However, even the fire was a substantial human invention, Apollinaire underlines that, in comparison with it, art in general was a much more important invention for a human being. Art is more powerful than nature itself, because it rises out of ordinary reality creating an artistic reality based on an artistic truth. So, nature is inferior to human artistic and spiritual works. Apollinaire begins his famous essay with the following statement: "Les vertus plastiques: la pureté, l'unité et la vérité maintiennent sous leurs pieds la nature terrassée" (Apollinaire 1991: 5). It means that the whole nature doesn't have that inner strength and power that are situated inside the flame of visual arts. Apollinaire further develops the idea, focusing on the term of the artistic truth. He says:

> La pureté et l'unité ne comptent pas sans la vérité qu'on ne peut comparer à la réalité puisqu'elle est la même, hors de toutes les natures qui s'efforcent de nous retenir dans l'ordre fatal où nous sommes que des animaux (Apollinaire 1991: 8).

The truth of art is significantly different from the reality that surrounds us. This thought will be widely supported by generations of art critics. For instance, defenders of the poetic of postmodernism also discuss the question of the relation between fiction and reality in a way that corresponds to Apollinaire's meditations on artistic truth as a special, authentic reality. Thus, David Hackett Fischer says: "To the truth of art, external reality is irrelevant. Art creates its own reality, within which truth and the perfection of beauty is the infinitive refinement of itself" (Hutcheon 1988: 109).

According to these words of Apollinaire's: "[…] on ne découvrira jamais la réalité une fois pour toutes. La vérité sera toujours nouvelle" (Apollinaire 1991: 8), the truth in art is not the only one, singular and unchanging. On the contrary, truth in art is always new, different and inconstant.

The author continues by developing his ideas leading them to connection with the social role of great artists (poets or painters), which is a continual creating (revealing) a new face (new appearance) of what the real nature offers to the human eye (Apollinaire 1991: 12).

The art of painting was born from the creativity of the human spirit. But, above all, it originated from the human needs. This could be said also for other branches of art, which are based on different means of expression, but always with the same imperative: to adopt principles of the pure art (Apollinaire's "pureté"), of the integrity of the work ("unité"), and primarily, of the artistic truth ("vérité"), which is the most important precondition for an artistic creation to be defined as such, as artistic. Apollinaire recognizes that purity in artefacts of black African art (sculptures, masks, fetishes). He emphasizes its simplicity and the value of the artistic vision where a boundless lyricism and passion are both real and surreal. For Apollinaire, being surreal equals being purely artistic (Blanchère 1981). Plasticity of those sculptures are based on the particular, reduced form of a figure, exactly what Paul Cézanne highly esteemed, and what cubists would take over. The aesthetic of

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cubism – which was rising in parallel with Apollinaire's thoughts about art we are analysing – will be strongly connected to the aesthetic of black African sculptures, thanks to Apollinaire's engagement as a tireless critic. His meditations were always clear and easy to be understood. Among his numerous successors, the Serbian writer and critic of art and literature Rastko Petrović will also examine the aesthetic of the "new art" with the same passion as Apollinaire did (Petrović 1974: 47)[4].

When Rastko Petrović considers the question of purity of art, he introduces a term by which he weighs "successfulness of placing the first relation" ("uspešnost davanja prvog odnosa")[5]. If the artefact is an original, harmonious unity, which mirrors artist's vision and his perception of the world, it is a work worthy of the epithet of artistic, i.e. it is a fruit of a pure art (Apollinaire's "l'art pur"), whose character differs from an industrial or other work with which it could not be identified[6]. Petrović explains that the *differentia specifica* for a pure artistic work resides in the existence of a truth which doesn't coincide with everyday reality. He thinks of "new worlds", parallel ones, which offer a "much more meaningful reality", which would not be loaded by ingrained patterns of thinking or reacting. In Petrović's opinion, that kind of meaningful reality originates from the structure of artistic work itself. To create a pure painting, a necessary prerequisite is to make such relations between elements (color, plastic etc.) which could participate in the creation of the perfect artistic structure. (Petrović 1974: 47).

A painting represents an artistic world for itself and only one of the possible artistic realizations. Petrović explains it by saying:

> A painting is primarily an experience, which occured above rules of life in our solar system, therefore, it is just an adventure, the most meaningful moment of a general movement in nature, caught once again in order to magnify a new reality, i.e. reality as one of innumerable possible worlds, parallel to ours. Thus, a painting represents the artistic world that contains its own solar centre, just like the space contains a large number of them, in which it transplants our beings, entirely as it is claimed in Einstein's cosmic theory, and in ineluctable way it would feel new values of space, time and individuality; it would not be an accidental condition which could be different, but it would be created according to constant laws on building new worlds (Petrović 1974: 20)[7].

[4] Rastko Petrović wrote essay *Izložba Sretena Stojanovića u umetničkom paviljonu. Savremena skulptura i naši posleratni umetnici* (*Exhibition of Sreten Stojanović in the Artistic pavilion. Contemporary sculpture and our after-war artists*) – which was published in *Politika* (*Politics*) in 1934 and signed with initials N.J. [Nisam Ja, which means Not Me] that he used as his pseudonym – where, describing context of German expressionism and French cubism, he mentions purity of black African sculpture as a „new ideal" for those artists. They see a body as a motif, not as a model. (Petrović 1974: 51–52). Accordingly to what he concluded, the aesthetic of modern European art is partly the same with the aesthetic of black African art.

[5] For further information about this topic see Popović 2008: 26–29.

[6] Rastko Petrović has read essay of Wassily Kandinsky in Serbian translation (*Slikarstvo kao čista umetnost* [*The Painting as a pure art*] published in 1922 in review *Misao* (*Thought*, vol. X, 2, p. 1379–1382), as well as Apollinaire's articles on art where he discussed a concept of pure art.

[7] All quotations taken form Petrović's essays have been translated into English by the author of this article.

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So, a painting is a unit, an autochthonous creation that has its own reality which differs from the visible reality of everyday life, in other words, a painting represents a specific universe[8]:

> Over one inception, over one ratio taken from nature, and according to the law which comes from the bottom of the artist's life, a new environment will be created, in which life will be led in a special way and more fully. Since it is not about the common reality of life, momentary one, but about infinity of possible solutions to the riddle of nature, a modern art is *naturalistic* and highly *cosmic* (Petrović 1974: 18)[9].

Analysing Picasso's *Guitarist* (*Guitariste)*, painting that author made "in new way, from fragments of the greatest number of its [guitarist's] own contents" (Petrović 1974: 22), Petrović concludes that Picasso offers the spectator an experience of complete "satisfaction by the perfect reality of the Guitarist", and also a feeling of attraction triggered by its "satiable personality" ("zasitljiva ličnost" – it's his newly coined expression, which means that the guitarist offers multi-faceted expression). The reason for this lies in the fact that:

> his [the guitarist's] essence is completely different than it is when he's posing in front of the painter; at a given moment while visually we have him in front of us, we do not see him only as a kind of vivid surface framed in the area of contiguous objects, but we view him from a side, as well as through the distance between him and the clouds and hills, and from all positions of two- and three-dimensional horizons (Petrović 1974: 22).

Therefore, it is not just about a certain surrealism, a realism beyond common reality, but about "over-reality" ("suviše-realnost"). In fact, by this neologism,

[8] The cosmic system or cosmic world of a painting implies its internal structure and plastic layers which are built on the basis of specific, timeless, metaphysical laws. This painting elevation to the level of autonomous reality in the cosmos, this highlighting and accentuating of too real element which lies in its nature, goes a step further than the cubists'aesthetic or Apollinaire's concept and closes to thoughts of Wassily Kandinsky, who, for example, said in an interview (Trifunović 1989: 125):

> Each real work is a new discovery – next to the wide known world will stay a new one, until then unknown... On the inner side it is under the general laws of the 'cosmic world'. Thus, besides 'natural' world it will be a 'new artistic world' – an equally real world, 'concrete one'.

The author further examines whether Rastko Petrović was acquainted with ideas of Kandinsky, as there were evident similarities not only in theirs thoughts but also in terminology.

[9] About literature as special cosmic order of things Rastko Petrović wrote a series of articles under the title *Stvarnost u stranoj i našoj književnosti* (*Reality in foreign and our literature*), published in the review *Vreme* (*Time*) in 1931 and reprinted in the book *Eseji i članci* (*Essays and articles*) (see Petrović 1974: 218–284).

In the second phase of his critical work, in the article *Sedma izložba grupe Oblik* (*The Seventh exhibition of the group The Form*), published in *Politika* on November 10th 1932 under his pseudonym N.J., Petrović abandons the theory of painting as a cosmos for itself (Petrović 1974):

> One painting has no longer pretensions to claim that it represents univers itself, that it is finished work containing all of its internal laws. The painting is now a world of colors, a world of temperament, unfinished, unrestless. Visual game, more young, more rejuvenate than previous; with more vigor and more impulse, with less meaning and less tragic.

Thus, Rastko Petrović will become apologist of coloristic orientation in the art critique, which will be increasingly developed during the fourth decade of the twentieth century.

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Petrović wants to underline that it is about expressing and synthesizing "all the contents of a painted motif and theirs relations in the univers" (Petrović 1974: 22).

Petrović writes enthusiatically about artistic creation as a process of giving a form to a new kind of reality:

> When the painter paints a model, he must make it more real in his work than it is commonly in his life; because in life he has the same value like objects all around him, making with him mutual relations, while in such new reality he will be the one everything will refer to (Petrović 1974: 22).

Petrović points out that in reality the *Guitarist* is "captured in space and torn apart in time", unlike in the painting where there is "perfect interconnection of time and space, which makes possible his [the guitarist's] multiplication" (Petrović 1974: 22). This process of "rearranging" elements from nature is the foundation for the creation of a high level reality, the artistic one[10]. In relation to this, René Magritte's famous "Ceci n'est pas une pipe"[11] finds its explanation.

Thus, the idea of the artistic truth as a special cosmos which coexists with a real world, can be adopted also in the field of poetic creation, because words – as William H. Gass remarked – "overcome the reality of things that they designate" (Hačion 1996: 251).

It is interesting to mention that Rastko Petrović published in 1925 an article under the title *Laž (kao duhovna tvorevina)* [*Falsehood (as a spiritual creation)*]. It was printed in the inner part of cover of the review *Svedočanstva* (*Testimonies*, N° 8). The term of falsehood (lie) is in contrast with the term of truth, but in this text Petrović's interpretation doesn't correspond to the common interpretation of the notion. He analyses it from a different side, as "deviation", a distancing from reality: it is not about being in opposition to reality, but about having the capacity to liberate the imagination. Understood that way falsehood participates in a process of creation of a pure artistic work. According to Petrović's definition, falsehood is:

> primarily a spiritual creation and an aesthetic liberation of the imagination, so it obeys the same laws as other spiritual works do. [...] Falsehood is an artistic creation which could be made, amended and improved. Thereby, falsehood is one of the most direct and the most subconscious of all spiritual creations; it is the most complete dream of a person, the happiest and the most successful one: therewith the craving of subconscious as well as coordinated wealth of imagination – arranged much better than in a dream during slumber – participate in it together unusually tight (Petrović 1974: 471).

This treatise about falsehood Petrović ends with the statement that in its inner life "its worth stands between the value of pure reality and value of a dream" (Petrović 1974: 472), and that it should "pay more attention to the beauty of its interior structure, as well as to the aesthetic of its creativity", and he underlines that, in fact, art immensely owes it. Because the falsehood – understood in Petrović's way, as something that turns away from the real world – takes part in creation of new, artistic, more real worlds, or said in Apollinaire's terms, in creation of "surreal" worlds.

[10] See *Pogovor* (*Postface*) in Petrović 1997: 169.

[11] This is Magritte's inscription for his painting of a pipe. The author's idea was to highlight the fact that painting, in general, represents a special universe, which is (always) different from the reality around us.

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4. Conclusion

When Apollinaire is talking about the truth in the work of art, he examines it within three virtues (purity, unity, truth) which he attributes also to the fire, which was the most important human invention. He emphasizes that the artistic truth can multiply itself, and that it is what gives to the art its special strength over common, quotidian reality. Rastko Petrović agrees with this remark and underlines the fact that unlike reality an artefact is more meaningful – it is related to deeper contents, in one word it is more real and represents a cosmos in itself. In comparison to Apollinaire's short definitions, Petrović's reflections go further with explanations, but always following Apollinaire's main concept, even when he introduces the notion of falsehood. He connects it with a process of the artistic creation (falsehood as a generator of imagination) and he observes it as means for achieving the artistic truth (falsehood as distancing from the truth and from the reality).

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Abstract

Apollinaire's thoughts concerning the aesthetics of visual arts appeared in a specific artistic milieu, which was established in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. Numerous exhibitions, poetic soirees and concerts were organized by promissing young artists who would soon afterwards leave a considerable mark in the art history and become part of painters' and poets' elite. Among them were yet unknown, but rising artists like Picasso, Duchamp, Dalì, Cocteau and others, and also Apollinaire, who actively took part in introducing a "new spirit of the times" (in French "l'esprit nouveau"), as he prophetically called the new atmosphere in Parisian artistic circles. In this epoch artists turned to the idea that a piece of art is multi-faceted and has syncretic character. In other words, it allows that aesthetics of different arts is permeate each other. So, poets and novelists were showing great interest in plastic arts getting to the point that they endeavoured to adopt principles of those arts in their poems or other literary creations. The aesthetic of visual i.e. figurative arts in general has been considerably transformed. (the new art had tendency to be dissociated from the mimetic principle), which was ecnouraging for poets, musicians or dancers to leave rigid traditional forma of expression and/or replace them with new ones, much more innovative. In that period art was in a process of mutation, turning to a new direction, which implied increased freedom of artistic expression.

The boundlessness of artistic expression, as a basis for the aesthetic of the "new art" ("l'art nouveau"), has been taken from the aesthetic of black African plastic. The artists in Paris enthousiastically accepted artefacts originated in Oceania, discovering their perfect clarity of expression. Apollinaire as one of supporters of the "new art", considered that a way toward pure artistic expression and artistic truth has to go through a serious analysis of complex internal relations existing in a piece of art itself. That process requires a mental effort (such as decomposition of artistic elements before approaching to a piece of art as a whole unit) in order to comprehend the idea of the artistic truth. That is to say that the "new art" was on the way to abstraction.

Among many of Apollinaire's admirers who were more or less influenced by his ideas about the aesthetic of visual arts, was the great Serbian novelist, lyric poet, literary and art critic and also diplomat Rastko Petrović (1898–1949), whose aesthetic positions and artistic criteria, for his critical essays on art as well for his literary writing, were based on Apollinaire's reflections about the value of African art. He mostly varies and widens Apollinaire's standpoint and partially differs from it, such as when he considers the question of truth in the artistic work.

When Apollinaire is talking about the truth in the work of art, he examines it within three virtues (purity, unity, truth) which he attributes also to the fire (taken as a symbol of painting and visual arts). He emphasizes that the artistic truth can multiply itself, and that is what gives to the art its special strength over common, quotidian reality. Petrović agrees with this remark and underlines the fact that unlike reality an artefact is more meaningful – it is related to deeper content, in one word it is more real and represents a cosmos in itself. In comparison to Apollinaire's short definitions, Petrović's reflections go further with explanations, but always following Apollinaire's main concept, even when he introduces the notion of falsehood (lie). He connects it with a process of the artistic creation (falsehood as generator of imagination) and he observes it as means for achieving the artistic truth (falsehood as distancing from the truth and from the reality).

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