

New Minor Literatures or the Debt of Contemporary Art

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*Law isn't charismatic: obeying law is self-understanding
only for those, who trust society, those, who don't,
want a new society and not a mere empty right
for starving and unemployment.*"¹

How does minor literature look like in the Bermuda-triangle of the information age,² the digital natives³ and the financial crisis that seems to become more and more permanent?⁴ And if we want this concept to also comprise the complexity of the reference points of our times and at the same time be suitable for various operations outside the context of the increasingly peripheral institutions of literature (and arts and culture in general), then what are the differences and particularities to consider?

Although in this paper I am considering the concept of minor literature in the context of the Hungarian language, I do not appropriate its nowadays mainstream nationalist discourse – for me, at stake is to link the contemporary phenomena of minor literature to the globally happening social and political issues.

¹ Péter György, "A Rubicon," *Élet és Irodalom* 34 (26 August 2011), 12. (Fragment translated from Hungarian by Zsuzsa Selyem)

² Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 2nd ed.).

³ Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* (MCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001.) <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf> , <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part2.pdf>

⁴ Although the 10th April, 2009 issue of *Time Magazine* ("More Quickly Than It Began, The Banking Crisis Is Over." <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1890560,00.html>) and Barack Obama, president of USA on 27th January, 2010 (http://www.treasury.gov/initiatives/financial-stability/briefing-room/reports/agency_reports/Documents/TARP%20Two%20Year%20Retrospective_10%2005%2010_transmittal%20letter.pdf) reported that the financial crisis is over, demonstrations against the political and financial system were organized all over the world from the beginning of the year 2011 (Tunisia, Egypt, Spain etc.). The Occupy Wall Street movement having as its slogan: "We Are The 99%" becomes worldwide spread, which is also a sign of the insolvability of the financial crisis (http://www.cbsnews.com/2300-201_162-10009481-50.html). Alain Badiou speaks about the spectacle of the crisis that is meant to obscure the structural inconsistency of the parliament-capitalist system. (Alain Badiou: "De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle?" *Le Monde* (17 October 2008. http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2008/10/17/de-quel-reel-cette-crise-est-elle-le-spectacle-par-alain-badiou_1108118_3232.html)

Some parameters of this contemporary scene, essential for my analysis, are: the way of functioning of market society, the status of artists in a market society, the informational networks, the social crisis and the ideological answers to them, literature as a form of art and as a form of making palpable/exposing the new ways of manipulating ideologies. And the most spectacular among these: the universality of advertisements.

To make my geo-historical context clear, a story that I refuse to overwhelm my analysis with, I briefly sketch the evolution of Hungarian literature in national minority conditions. It became an urgency to define the concept of minority literature in the beginning of the 20th century, after World War I, when important centres of Hungarian literature passed under the government of neighbouring countries.⁵ For Transylvanian Hungarian literature the new geopolitical situation resulted in a European and humanist approach of literature (Károly Kós, Aladár Kuncz), and later in “the dignity of particularity” (“a sajátosság méltósága” was the term introduced by Gábor Gaál, which term has in itself something self-diminutive). These terms may suggest some over ethicized grasping of minority condition, but in fact they are euphemisms for closure, regression and lack of communication between mainstream majority and minority actors of literary life, whose attitude can be described as expectants of gratification for modest achievements.⁶ In spite of serious intellectual struggles, the geopolitical approach did not result in such aesthetical results that would have saved Hungarian minority literature from

⁵ With 19th century nationalisms, the national canon of Hungarian literature was a relatively young construction, only half-a-century old, when the treatises after the WWI drew a tinier map of Hungary. The two totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century didn't favour open professional discussions, social elaborations of historical traumas. This can be among the reasons why the most recent *Histories of Hungarian Literature* (2007) is treating minority literature in the unreflected terms of 19th century's national and colonial ideology and, by the example of Sir George Gray, appointed governor of New Zealand in 1845, points out as the task of majority literators to familiarize themselves with the “Maori mythology”. Éva Jeney, “Transzszilvanizmus. 1937. Jelszó és vita.” *A magyar irodalom történetei* (Histories of Hungarian Literature), vol. 3 (Budapest: Gondolat, 2007).

http://www.villanyспенot.hu/apex/f?p=101:201:0:::P201_SZOV_KOD:12335

⁶ *The History of Hungarian Literature* edited in the times and under the guidance of the “soft-communist” Kádár-régime, has the following insight to minority literature: “Minority literature is mainly defined by the fact that it is not a wholly valuable literature: a part-literature broken from its spiritual centre, from its mother-literature, it is only a secondary literature that makes virtue from compulsion, if it is capable of or it has the opportunity at all.” (Miklós Béládi, ed., *A magyar irodalom története 1945-1975* (History of the Hungarian Literature 1945–1975), vol. 4 [Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982]. – fragment translated by Zsuzsa Selyem) <http://mek.niif.hu/02200/02227/html/04/index.html>). This patronizing attitude has not changed even after the political turn toward some kind of democracy. Ernő Kulcsár Szabó in his history of recent Hungarian literature continues with this tone. See: Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, *A magyar irodalom története 1945-1991*. (History of Hungarian Literature 1945-1991) (Budapest: Argumentum, 1994). I wrote about this question at length in: Zsuzsa Selyem, “Az ”erdélyi magyar irodalom”-beszédmódok egyik utópiája. Disztransz.” (One Utopia of the “Transylvanian Hungarian literature” discourse. Distransz,” In *Valami helyet*(Some place), 2nd ed.(Cluj (Kolozsvár): Komp-Press, 2003), 63–96.

oversimplified interpretations that reduced it to some rough and momentary ideological interests of the acting persons.⁷ Consequently, the universalist and aestheticizing model became recognized among professionals, and according to this model the creation of communities was not the task of literature; only particular poetics of authors or regional styles were developed.⁸

The relationship between minor and major literatures has changed radically in the contemporary social circumstances; culture as a whole, functioning subordinately to the market, has become a minor factor in society, with or without the acknowledgment of the intellectual working class. Commercial literature fulfils the surviving needs for reading of most people; besides mainstream escapade-literature there is no chance for works that deal with the lives, problems and complexity of present times. Looking at the book selling statistics, an impressive part of humanity read the profit-oriented products of book-industries, language doesn't matter – a bestseller has to be translated with astonishing speed into various languages. What does matter is to fit the readers' expectations.

In the context of Hungarian minority literature Imre József Balázs used the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of minor literature.⁹ Minor literature in their conception means: (1) an intense language based on strong deterritorializational factor (it is able to use language in peculiar, regional, archaic, broken or deviant forms), (2) everything is politics in it (“personal issues instantly become political because of the straitened space”), (3) everything gets collective value (it is not literature evolving around masters, it is a “literature that can create active solidarity”).¹⁰ From the point of view of collective and political qualities there seems to be a similarity between

⁷ From the point of view of colonialism-research Ágnes Klára Papp (In “A csirkepaprikás-elmélettől a töltöttkáposzta modellig. A kisebbségi irodalom újraértelmezési lehetőségei a posztkoloniális kritika tükrében.” [From chicken stew-theory to stuffed cabbage-model. Reinterpretation possibilities of minority literature in the mirror of post-colonial criticism] <http://www.barkaonline.hu/kritika/1538-a-csirkepaprikastol-a-toeltoettkaposztaig>) describes the post-Hungarian regions' Hungarian literature with the concepts of hybridism and magical realism; although her examples are convincing, these terms are working as filters against literary pieces with different poetics from these regions (consequently these terms are not able to grasp the characteristics of the studied phenomenon). Furthermore, these concepts were developed for the totally different cultural movements of places of the world with hugely different geopolitical background. The shared ideological and historical experiences of Eastern- and Central Europe remain untouched by these exoticizing methods.

⁸ In their recent history of literature, Gábor Schein and Tibor Gintli **have not** discussed Hungarian literature separately from literatures written in other languages. Still, speaking about one of István Szilágyi's novels, they use the concept of “Transylvanian prose” with the attributes: “moralizing emotional tendencies” or “language used for description with ornamental metaphors”. Gábor Schein, Tibor Gintli: *Az irodalom rövid története* (A short history of literature), vol. 2 (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2007), 654.

⁹ Imre József Balázs, “Minor és maior nyelvhasználati módok az erdélyi magyar irodalomban,” *Kisebbségkutatás* 2 (2006). http://www.hhrf.org/kisebbssegkutataskk_2006_02/cikk.php?id=1368

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975). Hungarian edition: *Kafka. A kisebbségi irodalomért*, trans. Karácsonyi Judit (Budapest: Qadmon 2009), 33–36. (English translation by Zsuzsa Selyem)

“minor literature” and the militaristic strata of Hungarian literature with its heroic ideals, but in fact they are each others’ opposites: “the latent expectation that a minority always has to wait for some kind of »organic completion« from the part of the majority is turned upside down by Deleuze and Guattari when they speak about the multiplicity of minor languages that makes possible a get-out from the cold power-language of majority.”¹¹

“Minor” is not a characteristic of certain literatures, it is “the conceptual condition of each literature working inside an institutionalized big one”,¹² so geopolitical factors in approaching minority literature become irrelevant. What becomes important is the analysis of works, languages, without trying to fit them into a pattern that is longing for its master, the major literature, and also without trying to institutionalize them by means of bureaucracy. The most fervent question is not the exotizing, subaltern-creating one so many times used till now: “why it is so good **for them** to write and read such things?” The questions and approaching methods do not suppose a uniform medium. The new minor literatures consist of works and interpretations taking part in globally happening communications, able to create new, sometimes totally unexpected communities.

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In what follows, applying the concept of minor literature, I shall try to interpret “The debauched poet’s case with capitalism”, a 4-part documentary that appeared in August 2011 on the site of one of the most visited Hungarian internet journals, index.hu.

The poet’s name is pronounced for the first time in trivial circumstances: he is calling on the phone the electricity provider and is introducing himself: “Hello, I am Krisztián Peer.¹³ You have recently cut off my electricity. I would just like to know, how much money I have to bring to you.”

Contrary to mainstream literature’s practice of celebrity cult in market society, here we have the poet, script-writer and playwright Krisztián Peer sharing the state of millions of losers of loan. He does not try to fit the rules of the self-polishing culture, he does not use metaphors – the question is, can he create a Deleuze-Guattarian (and Kafkian) metamorphosis?¹⁴ Is it possible to create something radically new by showing the real face of the bureaucratic power system?

¹¹ Balázs, “Minor és maior...”

¹² Deleuze-Guattari, *Kafka. A kisebbségi irodalomért*, 37–38.

¹³ Krisztián Peer poet and playwright was born on 22 July, 1974 in Dorog, Hungary. He studied literature, aesthetics and philosophy at ELTE, Budapest. His first volume of poetry appeared in 1994 (*Belső Robinson* [Inner Robinson]) and had a great critical impact. His next book, *Szöranya* (Fur mother, 1997) became a mythical reference in Hungarian literature. Till present he has published 4 volumes of poetry and he has written more than 10 plays (mostly for The Symptoms Theatre, Budapest) and he has participated as a screenwriter or as a poet not only in several films, but also in critical social events.

¹⁴ “Kafka deliberately kills every metaphor, every symbol, every meaning, as well as every setout. Metamorphosis is the opposite of metaphor.” (Deleuze-Guattari, *Kafka. A kisebbségi irodalomért*, 45.)

Has it the power of creating new politics and new community by providing the receiver, the spectator of the film a basis for understanding its own living conditions?

This particular case (loan in Swiss franc for a flat, rates grown to unrepayability, discussions in the Bank and with the organization of losers of loan) in itself doesn't enforce or weaken the odds of artistic expression. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: "life and writing, art and life stand against each other only from the point of view of mainstream literature"¹⁵.

Peer stated his claim that this series of documentaries has to be taken as art: "If somebody didn't see my – pedagogically deeply mistaken – postmodern Noszty's son¹⁶ happening on the Index-video (The debauched poet's case with capitalism 1–4), he/she should watch it and comment here (there, I asked for it in vain, it isn't possible). Moreover, I shall pronounce myself regarding this issue on the Radio Q Friday at 7 pm."

Peer's earlier blog posts prepare the happening to a certain degree as a planned, conscious and autonomous creation placed in an artistic context – to the highest degree of individuality, which is however completely subordinated to the circumstances and actors of the future event. I quote one of his posts at some length:

"Stolen idea (it's good to steal). Two young visual artists, Lilla Borsos Lőrinc and János Borsos gave me the idea. The Esterházy private foundation bought their painting entitled "My student-credit debt in forints" made with the so called «magic pencil technique» for 789.279 forints. This was the exact amount of their debt. (The site of this action: <http://diakhiteltartozasom.blogspot.com/>) "Why wouldn't it work for me too?", I thought. I attempted to sort out a more than 2 million forints debt for rates and approx. 11 millions capital debts.¹⁷ (As a matter of fact, the score of my film I have also stolen from the Béla Tarr – Mihály Víg team.) At the gate of the Bank I got a panic attack, my heart blew up, my stomach went up and down, icy sweat poured from me and my mouth had a metallic taste. But for the

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶ "Noszty's son" is a highly known Hungarian 19th century novel character, famous for his bohemian négligeance.

¹⁷ The attempt can be watched on youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7CFUbgp1Nk>. It would require a huge imagination on the part of clerks, HRs, communication managers to recognize as advertisement this little film containing only the logo of the Bank, Mihály Víg's peaceful-apocalyptic music and a monologue told shyly, stutteringly, and with lots of repetitions. The 2-minute film based on a monologue expressing defencelessness, on a music that reveals a universal solitude that is so clearly formed in Béla Tarr's films, and only the logo of the Bank, creating a complex, contemporary attitude to life and an extreme imbalance between the power and the individual. is too complex in its simplicity to be used as a any kind of advertisement. Except the case when the Bank experiences a metamorphosis and as a consequence it moderates its orientation from the profit to the active implication in the world's welfare. It was only a personification: banks as institutes cannot change their lives. Institutes cannot figure out the universal human condition from someone's solitary begging.

second try, as used to be in my childhood, I succeeded to pass the threshold and make the offer. Practically speaking, they laughed at my face. Barbarian folks.”¹⁸

The relationship between life and art is beautifully and inventively constructed in the visual object of the Borsos Lőrinc team and the actions around it. The object was exhibited in Octogon Art Gallery, Budapest in 2009 and it consists of ciphers that in their totality give the sum of their debt. Each cipher is a collage of symbols and objects representing the authors’ biographies, focusing on that part of them, when they have spent the money taken as credit. Next to this installation there was running a documentary film about the authors that dealt as much with their aesthetic concept as with their personal life. As Lilla Borsos Lőrinc said, the motivation of exposing their personal life was their remorse. Stating this, the artist is aiming authenticity instead of emphasizing the act of creation or the privileges of celebrity artists in the late-postmodern era. This is exactly how Edward Docx characterizes contemporary artistic tendencies.¹⁹

One of the extreme works of the market-fitting visual art of late-postmodernity is Damian Hirst’s installation entitled *For the Love of God* that was exhibited for the first time in the White Cube Gallery, London in 2007, then was cried in an auction for 50 million pounds. As it is well-known, the work consists of 8601 diamonds worth approx. 15 million pounds fixed on a human skull.

Docx says that it is postmodernity’s specialty to see in every value some kind of manipulating ideology, great narration has gone for now and the market price of the piece of art became the only orientation factor.²⁰

The action “My student-credit debt in forints” deliberately uses materials and stories that have only personal values. The artwork cannot be interpreted in postmodern aesthetical terms where the author’s personal story and social/financial status is absolutely irrelevant.

In my view, speaking about our post postmodern contemporary art as “the age of authenticity” is more a question of daydreaming than the style of a thoroughly analyzed era. We have no possibility of becoming innocent again; the chance of finding out some eternal originality beyond any comparison is not going to happen for sure. Or, if it is possible, it will easily lead to authoritarian ideologies that wouldn’t accept criticism at all. However, the autonomously and coherently shaped life and art relationship can result in some new forms of authenticity. As mainstream literature surrenders itself to the laws of market, hiding its unconditional conformity to the power system with exotic, gripping stories or the coquette sharing of private

¹⁸ <http://reszegeszregeszet.postr.hu/>

¹⁹ Edward Docx, “Postmodernism is dead,” *Prospect*, [20th July 2011, Issue 185](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/07/postmodernism-is-dead-va-exhibition-age-of-authenticism/). <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/07/postmodernism-is-dead-va-exhibition-age-of-authenticism/>

²⁰ Ibid. “Commoditization has here become the only point. The work, such as it is, centers on its cost and value and comprises also (I would say mainly) the media storm surrounding it: the rumors that it was bought for £50m, or that Hirst himself bought it, or that he offset his tax bill by claiming diamonds as tax deductible artistic materials, or that he didn’t buy it at all, or that nobody has bought it... And so postmodernly on. The paradox being this: that by removing all criteria, we are left with nothing but the market. The opposite of what postmodernism originally intended.”

life, there is plenty of room for minor literature to create these new forms of authenticity. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are timely/up-to-date in this respect: “How/So many styles, genres and literary trends – even the tiniest – are dreaming about functioning as majority, serving as official language of state (...) let’s dare to dream the opposite: becoming minority.”²¹

Krisztián Peer’s happening on index.hu generated an aggressiveness and hate-speech much beyond the accustomed level in the genre of anonymous comments. My cautious estimation is that approx. 1% of the comments related to the action with empathy. The posts with names and photos on the poet’s personal Facebook-account contained nice and thoughtful words, but this represented an – although rather extensive – restricted social network of people who know and esteem Peer’s artistic achievement and, moreover, here there is also just 1% who interprets the happening beyond the private sphere.²²

The deterritorialization gestures were strong, the situation was presented from the point of view of the invisible many, the script and the chosen characters of the documentary were ok, so the question arises: why did it not provoke active solidarity instead of swear-words? Was it not planned clearly enough? Looking at the posts of Peer’s personal blog, we can see that the action was constructed thoroughly. Secondly, there comes the stereotypical cynicism: people are not capable of understanding (because they are conformists, lazy, stupid, selfish, etc.)

On the one hand, “people” as a whole don’t exist; on the other hand, the special possibility of art is to create community for a while (for the 15 minutes catharsis after a theatre performance, for example) by revealing, exposing our most real life, in a way unimaginable before. So, there is no other solution than to admit that the video-series was indeed “pedagogically deeply mistaken”.

“Our video belongs to the column of Everyday Finances supported kindly by Allianz.” – The inscription appeared in the first part of the video-series, but I noticed it only after I watched it several times. And here comes the infocapitalist structure of our society: the so called freedom of the Internet is based upon the provider’s income from the ads. For not breaking the illusion of freedom, readers such as I developed a way of reading/consuming from the diverse sites on the Internet by excluding the ads from his/her/our sight.

But in what respect did the Allianz-ad change the situation?

While Krisztián Peer performed his clearly planned, personal risk-taking artistic action, the team of the index.hu site was executing a commission. Moreover, the team did not consider the famous insurance company only as a sponsor, but they also met its (real or imagined) requirements by adding such titles and synopses to the videos that at first sight, with great benevolence, would have been considered only ironical. Still, the fact was that the artist’s self-humiliation was transformed by arrogant, official, bureaucratic means into an authoritarian, paternalistic humiliation.

²¹ Deleuze-Guattari, *Kafka. A kisebbségi irodalomért*, 56.

²² In fact I found only one such post: “peer, this does much more than relate your story. and the proportions are also very good. i don’t know who you made it with, but congrats for them also. you succeed to bring a lot of typical (eastern-European) civilizational deep strata to light for a moment.”

They surrounded Peer's personal gestures with discriminating signs in a medium where they were the masters and they were the majority who make the rules. This time their main character was a pathetic figure. The artist did not defend himself against this image in spite of attempting to reveal one of the most common situations of being in debt. This image says: all people in need are pathetic individuals. The video-series succeeded to particularize Krisztián Peer's private problem as one of the most important social issues of our days that would have had the chance to – in Deleuze-Guattarian terms – “not refer to only one subject”.

So the real question regarding this performance became: why is it a good advertisement for an insurance society? The answer is not so complicated: the majority of the readers of index.hu are young, learned/educated consumers, who, manipulated by the crisis-spectacle, are searching for arguments to conform to the ruling system, but from time to time it may occur to them that they could live otherwise also. The goal: to present the alternative ways of life deprived of their force, joy and dignity, their gained autonomy, to make it look like a total failure in the eyes of the would-be deserters of the capital circuit.²³ I do not doubt that this team could produce a far more distressing video-series about an ordinary day of an Allianz clerk.

However, the failure of the performance gives us a clear image of the mainstream (not only Hungarian) reality. Unfortunately, it did not become a minor piece of art because it did not/failed to reflect sufficiently upon the context; the performer let it to be run as the message of an insurance society. In vain it is authentic/Its authenticity is in vain/superfluous, if the frame is ideological.

Minor literature cannot be pushed under the rule of finance ideologies.²⁴ Beyond its private credit, it transmits something that can be recognized as the possibility of involving freedom.²⁵

²³ The success of the advertisement can be clearly seen from the post written by the outstanding young editor and writer Endre Balogh on Peer's Facebook-wall: “You are such a pr*ck that we can orient after you – I, for example, searched my bills to pay out ☺”

²⁴ Here is a poem written by Krisztián Peer that forms the debt-situation resisting the finance ideologies: „Uram, neked oly kevés, amennyiből / újrakezdhethém. Higgy nekem, / hogy ne kelljen hazudnom. / Nincs mit beosztanom, annyi a törleszteni valóm. / Szeretnék csak neked tartozni. / Már most megmondom, / hogy nem leszek pontos, / és persze ugyanilyenben maradnánk, / ha adnál, nem menekülnék aztán előled, / meg persze az se baj, ha neked sincs, Főnököm!” In my humble translation: My Lord, it's so little for you / but from it I could start again. Believe me, / don't force me to lie. / I have nothing to economize / I have so much to amortize. / I wish to have debts only to you. / I say it for now, / I won't be punctual, / and of course we would remain in the same terms / if you would give me, and I wouldn't flee from you, / and of course it wouldn't be a problem if you don't have either, Chief!

²⁵ The word “freedom” appeared first in the Sumer language: “amargi”. It means remittal, forgiveness of debt, and – as the debtors in those times were exiled – “amargi” means also: returning to mother. See: What Is Debt? An Interview with Economic Anthropologists David Graeber <http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/08/what-is-debt-%E2%80%93-an-interview-with-economic-anthropologist-david-graeber.html>.