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| Avant-garde |
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| The term avant-garde has a double meaning, denoting first, the historical movements that started in the late nineteenth century and ended in the nineteen twenties and thirties; and second, the ongoing practices of radical innovation in art, literature and fashion in the later twentieth century (often inspired by the historical avant-garde and referred to as the neo-avant-garde). Within the context of modernism, historical avant-garde movements (such as Dada, Futurism, Vorticism, Anarchism and Constructivism) radicalized innovations in aesthetic forms and content, while also engaging viewers and readers in deliberately shocking new ways. Locked in a dialectical relationship between the avant-garde and modernism, as Richard Murphy has written (3), the historical avant-garde accelerated the advent of modernism, which routinely appropriated and repackaged avant-garde experimentation in tamer forms. As the Latinate term avant-garde took root first France and Italy, and later in Germany and English speaking countries, the trajectory of the avant-garde’s relationship with, or opposition to, modernism has been theorized in a myriad of different, even conflicting, ways across different cultures. Is the avant-garde an extension of, or a synonym for, modernism (as suggested in some early American criticism) or are the two concepts in opposition to each other (as proposed in Italian and Spanish criticism)? |
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As the Latinate term avant-garde took root first France and Italy, and later in Germany and English speaking countries, the trajectory of the avant-garde’s relationship with, or opposition to, modernism has been theorized in a myriad of different, even conflicting, ways across different cultures. Is the avant-garde an extension of, or a synonym for, modernism (as suggested in some early American criticism) or are the two concepts in opposition to each other (as proposed in Italian and Spanish criticism)?  Although it is almost impossible to trace its first usage, the etymology of the term avant-garde suggests a militaristic vanguard in advance of regular troops on the battlefield, an aspect highlighted in Renato Poggioli’s (1907-1963) influential Italian cultural study, *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (1962; *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*). Discussing the function of the avant-garde periodical (the ‘little magazine’) of literature and art in terms of a tool of assault, Poggioli describes it as ‘an independent and isolated military unit, completely and sharply detached from the public, quick to act, not only to explore but also to battle, conquer, and adventure on its own’ (23). This combative spirit is exemplified in *The Little Review* (1914-1929), a magazine published in Chicago, New York and Paris that championed anarchism, feminism and Dada, proudly proclaiming its militancy and exclusivity on its masthead, which read: ‘Making no compromise with the public taste.’ As a forward-moving entity, what Poggioli calls ‘activism’, the avant-garde movement ‘takes shape and agitates for no other end than its own self, out of the sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure’ (25). Such ludic exuberance, however, belies the avant-garde’s social thrust, propelled forward by antagonism, whereby, according to Poggioli, ‘the most showy avant-garde posture’ is directed ‘*against* society in the largest sense’ (30; emphasis in original).  Equally influential, Peter Bürger’s (1936--) contemporaneous German study *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*) also captures this oppositional spirit. Defining European avant-garde movements ‘as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society’ (49), Bürger specifies that the avant-garde’s privileged target of attack is the art institution. As he writes: ‘What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men’ (49). In contrast, avant-garde artistic practices, such as montage and cubist collage, are characterized by their strategic use of ‘reality fragments’, that is, ‘the insertion of material that has been left unchanged by the artist’ (Bürger 77), a revolutionary gesture that radically dismantles the boundaries that traditionally demarcate the spheres of art and life. Consequently, for Bürger, dadaist pioneer Marcel Duchamp’s (1887-1968) use of the ready-made offers the most prominent example of the avant-garde’s assault on the traditional institutions of art. Duchamp’s choice of a shovel as a ‘ready-made’ destroyed the very notion of autonomous art and negated traditional understandings of artistic production. As Bürger sums it up: ‘Duchamp’s Ready-Mades are not works of art but manifestations’ (52).  Extending, but also substantially revising, these earlier accounts of the avant-garde, feminist and queer studies scholars have inserted into the history of the avant-garde the radical productions of women avant-gardists, including the works of Duchamp’s sister, painter Suzanne Duchamp (1889-1963), and Duchamp’s self-proclaimed platonic friend, the German *émigrée* poet and performer Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927). These analyses reveal avant-garde expressions that were repressed not only by modernism, but also by masculinist avant-gardism. By focusing on the artists that modernism repressed, Amelia Jones, in *Irrational Modernism* (2004)*,* hopes to ‘offer a convincing counter-narrative of how we might understand (both historically and theoretically) the practice of the avant-garde’ (23). Within this expanded context, avant-garde battles are reformulated as performances of gender and identity, whose contributions also include crucial fights against censorship. Such revisionary cultural readings have also brought to light queered and marginalized artists active in salons and coteries, such as the *Neu-Romantic* Stefan George (1868-1933) *Kreis* in *fin-de-siècle* Berlin and Munich; or the New York Dada salon of Walter and Louise Arensberg (1878-1954, 1879-1953) (Naumann, *New York Dada*). Distinct from Poggioli’s focus on confrontation, these revisionist accounts foreground networking, collaborating, and the deliberate blurring of authorship boundaries.  The recuperation and reproduction of early twentieth-century avant-garde expressions in the late twentieth century raises questions about the status of the neo-avant-garde and its relationship to modernism and postmodernism. ‘What is Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?’, Hal Foster asked in the title of his 1994 article, before defining the neo-avant-garde as ‘a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and ‘60s who reprised and revised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and ‘20s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, mono-chrome painting and constructed sculpture’ (5). Are neo-avant-garde expressions mere nostalgic or passive repetitions of the earlier historical avant-garde? If the avant-garde’s core function is to be involved in the destruction and negation of the old, the traditional, and the institutional, there will come a moment, as postmodernist writer Umberto Eco argues, ‘when the avant-garde (the modern) can go no further’ (Calinescu 277). In the end, as Eco propounds, the historical avant-garde itself solicits the postmodern reply, the willingness to revisit the past with ‘irony, not innocently’ (277). |
| Further reading:  (Bürger and Snow)  (Calinescu)  (Foster)  (Gammel)  (Jones)  (Murphy)  (Naumann)  (Poggioli)  (Sawelson-Gorse)  (Watson) |