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Theories of the avant-garde

> It has been said that the degree to which a revolution is developing *qualitatively* different social conditions and relationships may perhaps be indicated by the development of a different language: the rupture with the continuum of domination must also be a rupture with the vocabulary of domination.
>
> Herbert Marcuse[1]

Introduction

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) Peter Bürger sets himself the task of producing a definition of the progressive artistic movements of the early twentieth century that will both distinguish them from earlier avant-garde phenomena as well as from other contemporary artistic movements of the modernist period such as aestheticism.[2] Although Bürger's model offers what purports to be a general definition of the historical avant-garde it is clear that for the most part his theoretical descriptions and analyses are oriented specifically towards dada and surrealism, his examples being drawn almost exclusively from these movements and in particular from the plastic arts rather than from literary texts. Notably absent from Bürger's analysis of the movements of the avant-garde, for example, is one of the seminal phenomena of early twentieth-century literature, film and art, namely German expressionism. Bürger adds a suggestive note to the effect that one

[1] *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 33.

[2] Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974). Here I refer wherever possible to the English translation by Michael Shaw, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Unless otherwise noted, all other translations throughout are my own.

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might, within certain limitations, discover a number of essential avant-garde features in expressionism, such as its critique of the institutionalized character of art and its characteristic rejection not simply of previous movements but of the tradition of art in its entirety.[3] Yet having noted that these similarities remain to be worked out concretely in future analyses Bürger himself skirts the central problem of expressionism and its relationship to the avant-garde.

In the light of the current debates on postmodernism there has been renewed interest both in modernism and the avant-garde and, more particularly, in the nature of their mutual relationship. Postmodernism has frequently been seen for example as a phenomenon which is neither totally new nor a movement constituting a radically innovative stylistic breakthrough, but rather as the attempt to reconfigure in contemporary terms some of the questions already faced by modernism and the avant-garde.[4] In this sense, any definition of postmodernism must inevitably depend upon a prior understanding of those earlier phenomena. Postmodernism might then be thought of as a change of ''dominant'' within modernism,[5] or as a realignment of a constellation of meaning mapped out in the shifting relations between the reference-points denoted by modernism, the contemporary and the avant-garde.

Given this configuration of terms, the issues dealt with by Bürger's book become especially important in helping to establish the various distinctions and interdependencies operating between modernism and the avant-garde. The omission of expressionism from Bürger's discussion is then all the more surprising in view of its importance as a crucial space in which the avant-garde confronts modernism and in which the differences between the

[3] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 109, note 4.
[4] See for example Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 168.
[5] Brian McHale employs the Formalist concept of the ''dominant'' (derived from Tynjanov and Jakobson) in order to describe the transition from modernism to postmodernism. McHale sees a shift from a period dominated by epistemological issues to one concerned more with ontological matters (such as the confrontation between different realities). See McHale's article ''Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing,'' *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 53–78, and also his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987) where this idea forms the central thesis.

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two are negotiated. For although expressionism has been labeled the ''historical modernist movement par excellence,''[6] besides its modernist characteristics – such as its shift from transparent, realist representations of a common world, towards abstraction, obscurity, and the investigation of subjectivity and the unconscious[7] – it also shares many of those key features, in particular the revolutionary, counter-discursive and anti-institutional functions, by which Bürger defines the historical avant-garde.

This overlap is itself significant. For the various contradictory impulses within expressionism illustrate that the avant-garde is a much more ambiguous and heterogeneous phenomenon than Bürger – with his narrow focus on dada and surrealism – would sometimes have us believe. More typically the avant-garde serves as the political and revolutionary cutting-edge of the broader movement of modernism, from which it frequently appears to be trying with difficulty to free itself. Modernism and the avant-garde often seem to be locked into a dialectical relationship in which the avant-garde questions the blind spots and unreflected presuppositions of modernism, while modernism itself reacts to this critique, at least in its later stages, by attempting to take into account its own poetics some of the spectacular failures and successes of the historical avant-garde.

The current debates on postmodernism and its relation to modernism and the avant-garde have not only renewed interest in early twentieth-century art then, but have provided both fresh perspectives with which to re-read the texts of this period, as well as new questions and theoretical strategies with which to approach their characteristic problematics. The goal in re-reading expressionism through Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and in the light of the recent discussion on the modern (and postmodern) period is thus twofold.

Firstly, it is important to interrogate Bürger's influential work and to develop his argumentation by testing it against a broader range of avant-garde and modernist phenomena than Bürger's own examples provide in order to discover the extent to which the

[6] For example by David Bathrick and Andreas Huyssen, ''Modernism and the Experience of Modernity,'' *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*, ed. Huyssen and Bathrick (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 8.
[7] See Walter Sokel's definition of expressionism in terms of modernism in his book *The Writer in Extremis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 18.

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various methodological categories which make up his theory are capable of distinguishing between the contemporaneous phenomena within the modernist period. For example, to what degree does expressionism fulfill the avant-garde's role of producing a fundamental re-thinking of the artist's social practice, together with a full-scale interrogation of the social and institutional conditions of art? To what extent does it remain caught within modernism's predilection for aesthetic autonomy and its drive for purely technical and formal progress?

Secondly, by re-reading the texts of expressionism in the context of some of the new questions which have been thrown up recently by the postmodernism debate as well as by the related discussion surrounding Bürger's theoretical model, it is possible to observe the extent of the ''epistemic'' or ''paradigmatic'' shift which has taken place between the progressive movements of the early twentieth century and the contemporary culture of postmodernity. Re-examining expressionism in this light forces us to reconsider both the degree of real innovation brought about by postmodernism, as well as allowing us to appreciate the extent to which the expressionist avant-garde preempts postmodernism in deconstructing and re-writing the established images and constructions of the world – the anticipatory effect that Jochen Schulte-Sasse has called a ''postmodern transformation of modernism.''[8]

In this respect my investigation into expressionism and its relationship to modernism and the avant-garde is also intended as a contribution towards the ongoing debate on modernism and the postmodern by undertaking precisely the kind of concrete analysis of individual texts that has become rather rare in the discussion. It has become a pressing obligation to focus in detail again upon some of the important literary texts which subtend the theoretical categories employed in this discussion, since their specificity has frequently been lost from view at the level of generalization on which much of the theoretical debate has been conducted.

German expressionism is itself notoriously difficult to define, and one hesitates even to use the term ''movement'' in connection with this multi-faceted phenomenon, given that term's implica-

[8] Jochen Schulte-Sasse, ''Carl Einstein; or, the Postmodern Transformation of Modernism,'' *Modernity and the Text*, ed. Huyssen and Bathrick.

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tion of a cooperative endeavor or single-minded tendency. The expressionist generation was such a broad and varied group of writers and artists, that it is unlikely to yield to any single definition or generalization. Since conventional categorizations of such literary movements frequently have the tendency to obscure differences by reducing a diverse and varied phenomenon to the terms of a broad homogeneity, it would seem more appropriate to describe the position of expressionism by locating it instead through its relations to the reference-points of modernism and the avant-garde. The central principles and functions that these categories embody would then figure as the points between which is mapped out the area occupied by the art of expressionism.

Given that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tends to confine the heterogeneity of the avant-garde within certain narrow limits, expressionism as a diverse and multidisciplinary cultural event is perhaps the ideal example with which to test Bürger's theses. At the same time Bürger's criteria concerning the avant-garde bring to the existing scholarship on expressionism important alternatives to those traditional approaches to the movement which have frequently obscured its radical and oppositional characteristics.

Let us now examine in detail some of the central categories of Bürger's model (in particular the notions of montage and aesthetic autonomy), and propose certain revisions to Bürger's theory which will be important in describing some of the essential features of German expressionism in the chapters ahead.

Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: ideology-critique, affirmative culture and the institution of art

Previous studies of the avant-garde such as Matei Calinescu's *Faces of Modernity* have frequently defined it merely as a later, more radical and more ''advanced'' phase of modernism, distinguished by its ideological and overtly political orientation from the more formal, aesthetically purist and ''subtly traditional'' character of mainstream modernism.[9] Bürger's study is unique in trying to define the nature of the avant-garde not only by relating it to the literary-historical context but with regard to certain changes in the perception of the *social* functions of art.

[9] Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (1977; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 96, 149.

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Bürger sees the development of art within bourgeois society as characterized by its historical shift towards increasing aesthetic autonomy, a condition he defines with Habermas as the ''independence of works of art from extra-aesthetic uses.''[10] This process of liberating art from all practical demands external to it culminates in the movement of aestheticism or ''l'art pour l'art.'' Nineteenth-century aestheticism figures as a radical attempt firstly to turn art in upon itself, and secondly – as with modernism's characteristic interest in issues such as the poetics of silence and the crisis of language – to concern itself largely with the medium itself. It is consequently through the excesses of aestheticism, its extremes of hermeticism and aesthetic self-centeredness, that ''the other side of autonomy, art's lack of social impact also becomes recognizable.''[11] And it is in response to this recognition that the ''historical avant-garde'' emerges as a movement defined by its opposition to this shift towards hermeticism.

To extend Bürger's argument, one could say that it is not the emergence of the phenomenon of aestheticism in itself that suddenly and miraculously reveals the practice of autonomy and which consequently calls down upon itself the wrath of the avant-garde. Art's claim to autonomy had existed in bourgeois society in Germany for example at least since Kant and Schiller. If we look beyond the narrow confines of the immanent theory of the development of art – from which Bürger uncharacteristically appears to be arguing at this point – we can see that the crucial moment of change to which the avant-garde responds is not only the extremism of the aestheticist movement and its characteristic gesture of turning its back on the real world. Rather, it is the fact that the aestheticist movement should take this course at this particular *historical* juncture, in other words, at the beginning of twentieth-century ''modernity,'' and in a period of unprecedented and momentous economic and technological revolution in society. Aestheticism's characteristic reaction of retreating into hibernation and hermeticism is all the more shocking since it contrasts with the kind of artistic response one *might* have expected, namely

[10] ''(Die) Selbständigkeit der Kunstwerke gegenüber kunstexternen Verwendungsansprüchen.'' Jürgen Habermas, ''Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik,'' *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972). Quoted by Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 46 note 13; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 110, note 13. I have used my own translation in this case.

[11] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

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a more socially oriented response in art, or at least the attempt to formulate these new socio-historical experiences in contemporary aesthetic terms. The historical significance of aestheticism for the emergence of the avant-garde lies then in the conjunction of historical factors: the extreme turmoil of contemporary society combined with the crassness of aestheticism's blank rejection of any need to react to it. It is this response that begins to raise doubts concerning the legitimacy of such autonomous art forms, and so ultimately mobilizes the avant-garde.

According to Bürger, it is the particular character of the avant-garde's response to aestheticism that is important. For with the historical avant-garde movements the social sub-system of art enters a new stage of development. Dada, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde no longer criticizes the individual aesthetic fashions and schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution: in other words with the historical avant-garde art enters the stage of ''self-criticism.''[12] In order to

[12] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22. Although dada's ''self-criticism'' of the institution of art is indeed very powerful, Bürger is quite wrong in assuming that dada is not equally concerned to attack its ''rival'' movements, including its most immediate predecessor, expressionism. Indeed, this onslaught on expressionism is an essential feature of much of the early writing of both the Zürich and Berlin phases of dada, and expressionist idealism forms a favorite target for dada's familiar vitriolic attacks. The first dada manifesto (1918) for example takes as its starting point its own distance from expressionism's ''pretense of intensification'' (''Vorwand der Verinnerlichung'') which allegedly stifled any progressive tendencies and served merely to hide the expressionists' own bourgeois leanings. See Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984), 31–33. Similarly, in Raoul Hausmann's text ''The Return to Objectivity in Art'' (''Rückkehr zur Gegenständlichkeit in der Kunst'') Expressionism is described as ''the culture of hypocritical stupidity '' (''die Kultur der verlogener Dummheit,'' Huelsenbeck, *Dada*, 115). Meanwhile Richard Huelsenbeck's various ironic attacks in ''En avant Dada'' (1920) describe expressionism's critical response to modernity as merely ''that sentimental resistance to the times'' (''jener sentimentale Widerstand gegen die Zeit'') and illustrate its alleged naivity – thereby tarring the entire movement with the same brush – by citing Leonhard Frank's ''Der Mensch ist gut'' (*dada*, 118–119). In the context of our discussion it is interesting to note that dada's proponents see themselves in an explicitly avant-garde role, ''gathered together to provide propaganda for a form of art from which they look forward to the realization of new ideals'' (''zur Propaganda einer Kunst gesammelt, von der sie die Verwirklichung neuer Ideale erwarten,'' *Dada*, 120). Consequently, dada sees itself as having given up any remnants of the ''l'art pour l'art Charakter'' and having changed its goal: ''instead of continuing to create art, Dada has sought out an enemy . . . The movement, the stuggle was uppermost'' (''anstatt weiter Kunst zu machen, hat sich Dada einen Gegner gesucht . . . Die Bewegung, der Kampf wurde betont,'' *Dada*, 120).

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appreciate the full significance for the avant-garde of this development towards ''self-criticism'' it is important to understand here exactly what Bürger means by the term and how it relates to other analytical approaches in progressive art, in particular to ''ideology-critique.''

Bürger takes as the starting point for his discussion of ''self-criticism'' firstly Marx's analysis of religion as ideology and of the twofold character of such ideology; and secondly Marcuse's application of this analysis to the field of art.[13] From Marx's analysis Bürger draws the following conclusions for his own model:

> 1. Religion is an illusion. Man projects into heaven what he would like to see realized on earth. To the extent that man believes in God who is no more than an objectification of human qualities, he succumbs to an illusion. 2. But religion also contains an element of truth. It is ''an expression of real wretchedness'' (for the realization of humanity in heaven is merely a creation of the mind and denounces the lack of real humanity in human society). And it is ''a protest against real wretchedness'' for even in their alienated form, religious ideals are a standard of what ought to be. (7)

The social function of religion, like art, is therefore characterized above all by its twofold character, that is, by what we can call its ''duplicity'': it permits the experience of an ''illusory happiness'' but to the extent that it alleviates misery through illusion, it makes less pressing (and thus less likely) the possibility of any *genuine* change leading to the establishment of ''true happiness.''

Herbert Marcuse's famous essay ''On the Affirmative Character of Culture'' (1937) precedes Bürger both in adopting Marx's method of analyzing the duplicitous character of religion and in reapplying it to the similarly ambiguous ideological function of art in society.[14] Marcuse maintains that, like religion, art has the positive function of preserving society's unfulfilled ideals and ''forgotten truths.''[15] It thus contains an important critical element: it protests against the deficiencies of a reality in which these ideals have disappeared. But on the other hand, in as far as art serves to compensate in the realm of aesthetic illusion

[13] Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Herbert Marcuse, ''The Affirmative Character of Culture,'' *Negations*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 88–133.
[14] Marcuse, ''The Affirmative Character of Culture,'' 120–122.
[15] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 11.

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(''Schein'') for these real-life deficiencies, it simultaneously sublimates and defuses this protest. Paradoxically then in preserving life's unfulfilled ideals art may take on a quietist and ''affirmative character'' in as far as it serves merely to stabilize and legitimize that reality against which it protests.

In both of these analytical models the practice of ''ideology-critique'' lays bare the grain of truth contained within the illusion created by religion and art, while simultaneously demonstrating the ideological constraints on implementing this truth which are imposed by these institutions themselves. If the emergence of the avant-garde marks art's entry into the ''stage of self-criticism,'' it also signifies the beginning of a similar form of ''ideology-critique'' through which artistic practice is turned against art itself as an institutional formation. It means that art's critical power no longer operates merely in an ''immanent'' fashion, that is, as the kind of criticism that remains enclosed within the social institution (such as when one type of religion criticizes another) and within which it would consequently be blind to the institutional restraints operating upon it. In as far as it analyzes the overall functioning of the institution itself – and especially its social and ideological effects rather than the individual elements of the system – self-criticism operates as a form of ideology-critique performed from *within* the limits of the institution, yet directed *against* its institutional functions. What this self-criticism means in practical terms for the ''historical'' avant-garde of the early twentieth century is that, unlike previous avant-garde movements, its subversive or revolutionary character is demonstrated by the way that it turns its attention increasingly to the institutional framework through which art is produced and received, and to the ''dominant social discourses'' which emerge in art through these institutional mediations.

As we have seen, the institutionalization of art reaches a crucial stage where those seemingly perennial conditions of art, namely autonomy and the absence of social consequence, are valorized as goals in their own right, in particular by the movement of aestheticism. The ''historical'' avant-garde's critical response to this situation takes two forms.

Firstly, it deconstructs the claim that these ''universal'' principles of autonomy constitute the inevitable conditions of the possibility of art. Similar to the way in which the avant-garde

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reveals that even realism or mimetic representation – long thought of as perennial and unchanging criteria of value in the Aristotelian tradition – are actually merely a set of culturally-privileged codes which have simply attained a special institutional status, so it also exposes the notion of autonomy as an arbitrary value which is *institutionally* imposed upon art.

Secondly, the self-critical response of the avant-garde leads to an awareness of the fact that with the progressive detachment of the ''sub-system'' of art from the practice of life – a separation that is part of a more general process of what Max Weber calls the differentiation or ''rationalization'' in modern society – art's duplicitous or ''affirmative'' function is reinforced. Although autonomy offers a degree of independence and critical distance from society, art simultaneously suffers from this isolation. For any social or political content is instantly neutralized when the work of art is received as a purely ''imaginative'' product, an aesthetic illusion that need not be taken seriously.

In connection with this self-critical impulse of the avant-garde the concept of the ''institution of art'' becomes one of the key notions used by Bürger to analyze the social administration of the aesthetic sphere. He uses this term to refer both to the ''productive and distributive apparatus'' of art but also more particularly to the ''ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.''[16] Bürger further defines the institution of art in a later article as that set of social conditions which determine the particular functions of art in a given historical period, and he emphasizes further that although alternative conceptions of art may exist, the institution of art at any given time is always predisposed towards the dominance of one conception of art in particular.[17] Thus, the term describes both the attitudes taken up towards art in society as well as the ideological and institutional limitations imposed upon art's possible effects.

The importance of the institution of art may be measured by the vehemence of the avant-garde's attacks upon it. These attacks also illustrate the degree to which the more progressive artists and

[16] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

[17] Peter Bürger, ''Institution Kunst als literatursoziologische Kategorie. Skizze eine Theorie des historischen Wandels der gesellschaftlichen Funktion der Literatur,'' *Vermittlung – Rezeption – Funktion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 173–174; 177.

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