

Researching the Avant-Garde: A Book Review Article of New Work by Bohn and Sell

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Blaž ZABEL

Researching the Avant-Garde: A Book Review Article of New Work by Bohn and Sell

The avant-garde has always been a difficult field to grasp as it is difficult to define what it actually is. It can signify a specific artistic movement in the beginning of the twentieth century, usually defined as the "historical avant-garde." However, the term avant-garde can signify later and even contemporary artistic production, sometimes called the "neo-avant-garde" (see Foster). Further, the term avant-garde can even signify different social and political tendencies: whatever it may be, it is spanning across different media of art and often using intermediality to express ideas. It can be understood as an international phenomenon with various and often contradictory currents and that form around different centers such as metropolises, leading authors, artistic groups, or manifestos. I review two recent studies dealing with the avant-garde: *The Avant-garde Imperative: The Visionary Quest for a New Language* by Willard Bohn (2013) and the second *The Avant-garde: Race religion war* by Mike Sell (2011). They both tackle the questions outlined above, approaching them, however, with different methodological presumptions: Bohn in the frame of the traditional comparative literary studies and Mike Sell from the perspective of cultural studies.

Bohn starts *The Avant-garde Imperative* with a short theoretical definition of the avant-garde movement and a critical commentary on Peter Bürger's idea of the avant-garde as "an attack on the status of art in the bourgeois society" (49). In contrast, Bohn proposes that all avant-garde movements created meaningful art and that they wanted to reinvent art by transcending the boundaries. This is the reason artists moved away from realism and began to explore subjective reality or attempted to form a new reality, a reality of/for the future. However, this was not sufficient: if the avant-garde had wanted to realize visionary ideas, they needed to invent a new language, a thoroughly new way of expressing those ideas as Bohn writes: "perception is essentially a form of cognition, and cognition is essentially a form of perception. So important were the vision and expression to the vanguard enterprise that this double quest soon became obligatory — an avant-garde imperative" (6). All other characteristics of the avant-garde, such as intermediality, enthusiasm for technology, or the fact that only a small minority of artists could belong to the avant-garde thus derive from the basic avant-garde imperative. In his second chapter Bohn analyses the reception of the idea of the fourth dimension introduced by Albert Einstein (special theory of relativity in 1905 and general theory of relativity in 1916). Bohn analyses different manifestations of the fourth dimension in literature, especially whether it is perceived as space or as time. He provides two examples: while Marcel Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu* defined the fourth dimension as Time and at the same time discovered involuntary memory as a time machine, the cubist painters of the Puteaux School understood the fourth dimension as a new kind of space. Further, Amado Nervo depicted the fourth dimension as the domain of human soul, dreams etc., that everyday senses are not aware of. After Einstein's theory became known, so did the artistic world respond: Robert Müller, for example, predicted the new era ushered by Einstein's theory, while Rolando Martel, a poet from Buenos Aires, wrote a tribute to Einstein. Bohn concludes his chapter with an ascertainment that the idea of the fourth dimension and especially that of relativity had a significant effect on the avant-garde. However, for most of the important figures of the avant-garde (e.g., Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Weber, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound), it represented the creative imagination often conceived as spatial or temporal voyage.

In his third chapter, Bohn discusses works by Giorgio de Chirico, especially of those from his metaphysical period which spanned from 1909 to 1919. The main focus of Bohn's argumentation is the interpretation of de Chirico's 1914 *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* which is not a classical portrait; rather, it is a painting from a series of works which Apollinaire himself chose as his representation. For the purpose of its interpretation, Bohn examines the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on de Chirico, as well as those of classical statue (see also Green). Bohn identifies the bust of the statue in the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* as a cloaked portrayal of Apollo Belvedere and the silhouette in the back as being Dante Alighieri. Since both elements define the work of art as "a song of creation," the link to Apollinaire becomes more clear and expressive. Moreover, Bohn uses these findings for the reinterpretation of other works from de Chirico's metaphysical period among them the *Mystery and*

Melancholy of a Street and various "mannequin" paintings such as *The Seer*, *The Enigma of the Oracle*, and *The Phantom*.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the literary surrealist movement led by André Breton, which "sought to examine the unconscious realm by means of the written or spoken word" (77). Bohn first examines the manifesto of surrealism and stresses several key points: the role of irrational impulses, *le merveilleux* as exacerbated beauty, the supreme point where contradictions cease to exist, the idea of *l'amour fou*, and the surrealists' affiliation with Marxism. All these needed the implication of the avant-garde imperative: a combination of a new worldview with a radically new style of creation. For this purpose Bohn analyses several surrealist word games Breton performed and later published with his colleagues. The first game involved a question and a response in total ignorance of the preceding question: one person wrote down a question while the other wrote the response without reading the question beforehand. In this way, the surrealists wanted to express the irrational and the supreme point of antithetical synthesis: "As surrealist metaphors, surrealist dialogues juxtapose two apparently unrelated realities that, when the construction is successful, turn out to have something in common" (86). The word games can be divided into four categories: the first and the biggest group consists of what questions followed by a response, the second one of why questions, the third group does not have any fixed form, and the last group of word games involves merging two parts of a single sentence either without specified form or in a hypothetical construction. Bohn argues that many of the question-response dyads succeed in creating a meaningful and poetic micro-narrative, the most successful being the what? dyad and the hypothetical sentence construction. All other forms are, in Bohn's opinion, less convincing artistically.

In chapter five Bohn analyses F.T. Marinetti's *aeropoetry*. Bohn follows Noëmi Blumenkranz-Onimus's classification and divides aeropoems in three groups: the first group of poems describes what it feels like to fly and as a demonstration Bohn presents a poem by Piero Anselmi. The second group consists of poems which describe what one can see from an aeroplane as for example *Aeropoema futurista della Sardegna* by Gaetano Pattarozzi and the third group employs an aeroplane as a symbol or a metaphor. Interestingly, the symbolism of an aeroplane was not only used in poems, but also in poetry contests inaugurated by Marinetti: the winner of the contest would be crowned in a flying aeroplane. Furthermore, the poetry of the third group was also popular for expressing admiration for fascism as for example in Pino Masnata's poem "Fascismo. Aeropoesia in parole in libertà." The last group of aeropoetry used an aeroplane as a motif rather than as a metaphor. As for later aeropoetry, it changed in parallel to technology development and it often used motives of aerial warfare, parachuting from aeroplanes, tributes to specific pilots (mostly aerial aces), and technological innovations in aeronautic industry (for example, the invention of seaplanes). In his concluding chapter Bohn discusses the end of the avant-garde. In his opinion, Marinetti's turn to Catholicism in his "L'aeropoema di Gesù" drafted in 1943 and 1944 signifies the end of the futuristic movement. Excluding what Bohn calls a "partially recognizable neo-dada" surrealism, the last avant-garde movement still active, ended in 1966 with the death of Breton. Bohn thus identifies surrealism as the most important and widely known avant-garde movement.

If Bohn's *The Avant-garde Imperative* stays in line with traditional methods of literary history and the history of art, Sell's *The Avant-garde* proves to be the opposite, since he tackles the avant-garde from the perspective of cultural studies: "I try here to expand the framework of avant-garde studies in order to bring in the story groups, individuals, ideas, genealogies and implications that have been ignored or overlooked" (3). Further, the Sell thinks of the avant-garde as a performance and investigates the sociological and political aspect of the avant-garde, which results in transnational, intercultural, and even more importantly, transhistorical perspective of the avant-garde itself. Sell does not limit himself to the so called "historical avant-garde," but goes back to the nineteenth century and identifies the heritage of the avant-garde in political and social issues. Further, Sell questions the very basis of Bürger's theory of the avant-garde, when he demonstrates that the avant-garde is far from being trans-institutional. As he demonstrates with an analysis of the relations between academic institutions and the avant-garde movement and with the demonstration of its canonization, the avant-garde is always linked to some kind of an institution. Taking this into account, Sell formulates his own definition of the avant-garde: "The avant-garde is a minoritarian formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal and alternative ways, usually by challenging the routines,

assumptions, hierarchies and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institution" (41). This definition not only widens the field of the study of the avant-garde, but shifts its focus on minority and the minoritarian formations. The decision to look into three transhistorically political and social aspects of the avant-garde (race, religion, and war) thus seems a logical progression.

Sell opens the first part of his book — race in avant-garde art — with a presentation of *The Futurist Cookbook* and the racist tendencies in futurism thus demonstrating the dark side of some of the avant-garde movements. Although the influences of African, Oceanian, and South American art on different vanguards such as cubism are well known (see Janson, Davies, Denny, Hofrichter, Jacobs, Roberts, and Simon), Sell argues that most European artists perceived it as "primitive art" with all the negative ideological prejudices and that this resulted in a Eurocentric view and the Europeanization of non-European art, a process that took place within museums and private collections. Surrealists, however, stand out as a group opposing racism, colonialism, and chauvinism. An example can be found in René Crevel's work. Eventually, this surrealist support for the Other resulted in the (unfortunately) less known Caribbean surrealism. Taking into account the racist tendencies, Sell finds many parallels in the South African Afrikaner Broederbond, a small group challenging the majority that eventually acquired the position of power. Another example of avant-garde thought can be found in Henri de Saint-Simon's work, an inventor of the word avant-garde and his racist theory, which influenced the medical personnel and their assistance in colonization of Algeria. Frantz Fanon, however, was an outspoken opponent of French colonial politics and an active supporter of Algerian independence. Nevertheless, Sell identifies similar techniques used by colonial French medical personnel. This paradox takes Sell to another problematic issue of minority and European colonialism, namely the notion of theatricality of race and anti-racist struggle. In Sell's opinion, "race" is basically theatrical, but this theatricality has taken a harsh reality of its own. In the following chapter Sell demonstrates this notion with a comparison of the "gypsies" and bohemianism. The Roma people are a clear example of how a history of stereotyping, violent movements against and many legends forged around them, resulted in theatrical reality of this particular minority. Their authenticity thus cannot be fully determined, let alone understood, without this historically formed theatricality. Another minoritarian group associated with the Roma are the bohemians, who were the first to define what is today known as cultural politics. However, their view of the Roma was basically that of authenticity, which was just another form of their theatricalization. Eventually, this resulted in a so-called cultural turn of the avant-garde: a turn from the military concept of the avant-garde to that of arts activism. Furthermore, the cultural turn of the avant-garde produced a reaction of artistic production control formed in various anti-avant-garde politics. The milestone in this repressive tradition was the thought of Max Nordau: he levelled the artistic and cultural production with racist theory and coined a well-known and one of the most important terms for the contemporary studies of the avant-garde, that of "degenerate art." At the end of the chapter Sell analyses three possible — although in his opinion not fully successful — alternatives to racism in the form of modern performances such as by Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the activist group WochenKlausur, and those by Dwight Conquergood.

Sell devotes in the second part of his book to the relationship between the avant-garde and religion and he once more tackles Bürger's theory, this time with the assumption that any theory of the avant-garde must start with a critique of religion, an argument which, linked with the idea of the avant-garde as *l'art pour l'art*, projects the complete differentiation of avant-garde and religion. First, Sell defines religion by stressing what in his opinion its five main aspects are: religion as a way of thinking, as an institution, as a cultural practice, as embodiment, and as a collection of things (i.e., its materiality). Sell demonstrates his argument with a number of spiritualities which influenced avant-garde movements: mysticism (especially that of Emanuel Swedenborg), occultism, alchemy, nihilism (especially the influences of Nietzsche), and even Buddhism. The avant-garde was influenced by German expressionism and Sell points to Max Beckmann, Ernst Toller, and Nolde. Moreover, even some of the more recent (political and military) actions which show vanguard tendencies utilize religion for their purposes and Sell discusses Argentina's Dirty war, military strategy in Guatemala, Kosovo, and Mozambique, Christian Evangelism in the U.S., Gush Emunim in Israel, and Sayyid Qutb. Sell concludes that the exclusion of religion in avant-garde studies is a fallacy since every avant-garde movement is a religious critique of different religious systems of power.

In the last part of *The Avant-garde* Sell analyses the military-historical dimension of the avant-garde. The avant-garde was first coined as a military term and many of modern warfare phenomena are its direct successors, for example, special forces, guerilla, insurgency, etc. Each of them can be understood as a minority movement seeking a shift in political power through the use of alternative methods, particularly those which include culture. The military notion of the avant-garde can be likewise found in the historical avant-garde, for example in futurism and its connection with fascism. Another two examples would include Dada with the Cabaret Voltaire, a movement that reacted to military oriented politics and the surrealists' passive-aggressive subversion in occupied France during World War II. Sell demonstrates that the history of the avant-garde and that of aestheticized war are often parallel. For this purpose he utilises several examples: the first one is the poem "The Bard of Addis Ababa" by Melvin Tolson, a response to the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. The other example of aesthetics in war Sell gives the movement Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina as the other example of hand in hand collaboration of war and culture could be found in an insurgency or in Mao Zedong's instructions to his military and its culturalization. At the end of the chapter, Sell emphasises three points: 1) the role of the military in the public sphere which is not necessarily destructive, but can be productive (building of infrastructure etc.) and that indicates that the military can have a part in the formation of the social production and must as such be understood as a part of the society, 2) the recent generalization of the model of special forces in response to the global political and economic relations, and 3) the ever growing importance and role of the cultural education for the military, an analogy to the preceding analysis of military origins of the avant-garde.

Bohn and Sell approach the avant-garde with different methodological orientations: Bohn focuses on historical avant-garde movements and their main European currents — French surrealism and Italian futurism — while at the same time recognizes South American poets. There are some limitations to Bohn's research, however. For example, in his interpretation of de Chirico's work he fails to note his association with fascism and its influence on the artist's use of classical motives. Sell approaches the avant-garde with cultural studies and thus his work falls outside traditional literary study perspectives such as the historical and national perspective and thus Sell's study is wider including political and sociological aspect of the avant-garde, and its trans-historical and transnational characteristics. However, in my opinion he fails to include some of the important avant-garde figures, for example in Central and East European avant-garde art (see, e.g., Bojtár). However, works by Bohn and Sell lead to some important new findings. For example, a study of the fourth perspective in avant-garde literature, a new interpretation of Chirico's *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*, in-depth analyses of Breton's word games, innovative sociological and historical interpretations of the avant-garde, an identification of contemporary and global influence of the avant-garde, etc. My conclusion is that the avant-garde cannot be grasped with one theory and one methodological approach: to understand a phenomenon so diverse and complex, scholars need to utilize combinations of approaches available in literary and/or cultural studies, as well as in other fields. Both works are thus important and welcome contributions to the field of avant-garde research.

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