On the Pluriversality of the Avant-Garde


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The roundtable discussion between Wolfgang Asholt, Peter Bürger, Éva Forgács, Benedikt Hjartarson, Piotr Piotrowski, and Hubert van den Berg echoes concerns I have addressed in my work on the avant-garde in contexts of cultural production beyond the so-called “West”, and specifically in postsocialist China. Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-garde (1984 [1974]) was the starting point of my attempt to articulate a framework for understanding the Chinese avant-garde since the late 1970s and its twenty-first-century transition to “pop avant-garde” (Ferrari, 2012). But it was also the end point, to the extent that—when examined through a transnational lens—the avant-garde might not fit entirely the institutional model that Bürger has proposed. My conclusions resonate with Piotrowski’s consideration of the significance of contextual specificity for any theory—or “theory-death” (Mann, 1991)—of the avant-garde. Piotrowski focuses mainly on the post-1989 experience of Central and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, if one looks further eastward, toward Asia, or even to the Global South, his observations still ring true. Similarly, van den Berg underscores the inherent risk of attributing “a universal character” to the avant-garde; namely, the danger of concealing a “pluriformity” of diverse expressions that may arise from distinctive geopolitical circumstances.

The idea of a pluriform avant-garde motivates this brief reflection on the possibility of linking avant-garde criticism to the decolonial discourse on pluriversality advanced by Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, and others. A pluriversal perspective enables a view of the avant-garde as an inclusive, heterogeneous space that can accommodate divergent positions and acknowledge the often unequal power relations that the claim to (Western-centric) universalism has historically obscured. As Bürger himself remarks, quoting Piotrowski: “We have to reveal the speaking subject.” This becomes especially necessary when this subject happens to occupy a decentred or subaltern position within conventional accounts of the avant-garde(s).
Van den Berg then turns to the yet unresolved question of the historical value of the post-war neo-avant-gardes to reaffirm the critical imperative of accounting for contextual difference and considering “developments elsewhere, also in Eastern Europe”. I suggest that this “elsewhere” ought not to be only European, but global, and that this global elsewhere should serve as the basis for a “horizontally integrative” historiography (Frank, 1998) of the avant-garde that takes “pluriversality as a universal project” (Mignolo, 2018). To situate the avant-garde within a global pluriversal horizon does neither mean to exhibit a homogenized version of the historical avant-garde project in the contemporary society of the spectacle nor to corporatize what we may label as the “Avant-garde, Inc” for the benefit of fashion (see the example of Dior’s 2018 campaign cited in the preface to the roundtable transcript) and bland,apolitical cosmopolitanism. As the spatiotemporal latitudes of our inquiry expand, we should not lose sight of local specificity and of the nexus of aesthetics and politics. Yet, as Piotrowski proposes, we might approach globalization “not in terms of economy, not in terms of art market, not in terms of tourism or global mass media entertainment, but as an intellectual challenge.”

Thus, I concur with the prevailing sentiment in the roundtable discussion that the question we should ask is not what is or what defines an avant-garde today but, rather, what are its uses, functions, and continued significance. It is my view that, for this construct to bear any critical substance in our times, the pluriversality of the avant-garde (and of avant-garde criticism)—namely, its integrative and inclusive disposition—should not be limited to its geographical reach. It should also tap into the avant-garde’s inherent sensibility for the margins—aesthetic, political, institutional—to intervene directly in emancipatory action on a global scale. If the avant-garde can still be thought of as a progressively destabilising force, then it must be ethical and “participatory” (Forgács, transcript). To quote Piotrowski once again: “We have to take responsibility for the world. And we need something more, namely the utopia of emancipation. And this is exactly the heritage of the avant-garde.”

References


