Avant-Garde: What It (Not) Was

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The story of the avant-garde has no end, and the same can be said of the discussion on its meaning and objectives, its stakes and countless forms. It would be unfair however to judge the avant-garde from a purely presentist point of view. A way of looking at the past from today’s concerns and perspectives, presentism is a form of anachronism that is as biased and problematic as its secret twin, nostalgia. Much of current avant-garde criticism is either presentist or nostalgic, and that is not just another problem: it is exactly one of the problems. Rejecting avant-garde architecture because of its love of asbestos, excluding from screening avant-garde movies because they show characters smoking without cancer warning, despising avant-garde for not having seen the threat of global warming, these presentist criticisms are not the best possible way to revisit avant-garde’s history and reflect on its future.

It makes more sense, I believe, to look back at the avant-garde by taking into account its contemporary critics, and by critics I do not mean those who, for political or artistic reasons, considered the avant-garde a dangerous and despicable menace to art and society, but those who raised questions from within the field of nonconventional or anticonventional thinking.

A good example of such a powerful and still inspiring critique is Jeff Nuttall’s Bomb Culture, a legendary exploration of 1960s alternative society, recently republished by MIT Press (2019, fiftieth anniversary edition). “Bomb culture” actually means two things: first the life on earth after the nuclear bomb, a life characterized by the permanent danger of immediate and total destruction; second the attack launched to mainstream society by new and revolutionary forms of living, the aspects and details of which are presented in Nuttall’s book.

There is a strong historical analogy between Dada, as a both nihilist and utterly creative answer to the catastrophe of World War 1, and Bomb Culture, which can also be read as a testimony of a total reaction to Doomsday culture, a reaction that completely ignores the divide between life and art. Yet at the same time, there are crucial differences. Although Nuttall is sharply aware of
the historical line that links the cultural revolutions of the twentieth century, his take on the avant-garde, that is the avant-garde of the sixties, is dramatically negative.

The reason of Nuttall’s suspicion is simple. The conceptual framework of his book does not rely on the antagonism between tradition and modernity (or more sharply, between traditional art and avant-garde attempts to do away with traditional art and thus traditional society), but between art, which includes avant-garde, and something else, which he will eventually label as underground. Bomb Culture is highly critical of avant-garde, which according to Nuttall misses the point by fighting art and art-loving society, all with a capital letter, instead of embracing the negative and destructive energy of ways of living that have stopped worrying about that kind of old-fashioned categories. In other words: as long as the avant-garde continues to position itself against something that actually no longer matters, it cannot be the expression of the times as they are changing. The underground on the contrary, with its emphasis on sex, drugs, and rock and roll, does, at least according to Nuttall.

Whether Bomb Culture is a forgotten link in the history of the avant-garde or instead a kind of anarchistic, prepunk deviation of it, and whether these kind of first-hand testimonies continue to be relevant today or not, these are some of the questions raised by this now longer half-forgotten book.