

## An Insight on the Inconsistency of the Theoretical Construction of Avant-garde Concept in 20th-Century Art

Jaume Fortuny-Agramunt

Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses avant-garde art theory through the concept of originality, understood as shock. The initial hypothesis is that this theoretical construction is a misunderstanding because it neglects the body during the experience lived before the work of art. It reminds us that if we are aware of our presence, it is thanks to the fact that we are psychosomatic individuals. Even so, we tend to evaluate the work of art from philosophical reflection rather than from analysing the form that excites us. It shows how the materialisation of the work of art sought by the avant-garde should have destroyed our cognitive baggage. It concludes that it only succeeded in initiating a tendency in art towards rhetoric that reaches the present day, where theoretical constructions are the only works of art. The emptiness of this avant-garde art theory concerning the touching causes its inconsequentiality, being left without any other pretension as only art. The author relies on the fact that we understand ourselves as people through our subjection to what we see to make us understand that looking without feeling is a contradiction.

**Keywords:** Avant-garde theory, beauty, originality, Walter Benjamin, shock, aesthetic cognition.

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary aesthetics developed out of the general crisis of the mid-nineteenth century. It succeeded in displacing the traditional category of Beauty as the foundation of aesthetic reflection and artistic praxis. Since then, the intersection between Aesthetics and Creativity has increasingly assumed a supra-categorical role. Today, most dictionaries contain the lexicographical definition of Aesthetics as the science of the beautiful. However, reality shows how the beautiful ceases to personify aesthetic value in general and becomes a specific aesthetic value of categorical description. The beautiful leaves a generic void space, superior in the hierarchy- that is, supra-categorical- occupied by the axiom of romantic genius: originality.

The approach that aesthetic values can go beyond the limit imposed by beauty is already found in the development of the aesthetic categories of the eighteenth century, for example with Burke (A philosophical inquiry into the origin of the sublime and the beautiful, 1757), Kant (*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und des Erhabenen*, 1764), Mendelssohn (*Über das Erhabene und Naive*, 1771), or Diderot (*Recherches Philosophiques sur l'Origine et la Nature du Beau*, 1772); it is Romanticism that establishes the repudiation between Beauty and Art. The Aesthetics proposed by Hegel [1] provokes the critical moment of the classical conception: the beautiful no longer functions as a predicate of a value judgment and

consequently no longer involves a laudatory judgment. The distinction attributed to the subject of an aesthetic quality gives way to a differentiated manifestation. Hegel's deep concern for underlining the concept of autonomy in relation to the aesthetic domain sprouts: without sensible attire, the idea no longer needs art. The Hegelian inheritance leads to a subject-object relationship defined by the new strategy of the original as a supra-categorical status where new categorical resources can be found: the beautiful, the monstrous, the sinister. Nevertheless, here we will deal with the heritage of the avant-garde concept – the surprising and the obscene [2] – using ready-made Fontaine as a catalyst for conjecture as its best example.

### TO DEEPEN THE MEANING OF AVANT-GARDISM

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century changed *Weltanschauung*, which shifted from the concept of genius to the concept of the contentious. Although the Romantic resource of eccentric and self-inspective manifestation in the face of reality is maintained, the committed insertion takes power within it. Multiple formulations coincide with the same axiological emergence: heroic avant-gardism. This emergence is, fundamentally, a cultural phenomenon of a hostile, critical and combative sign, with opposition to the reification of objective cultural forms as its primary reason. Nonetheless, if we want to go deeper into the meaning of avant-gardism, it is unavoidable to turn to the origin of its meaning. Avant-garde is a military concept with later political deviations that a group of poets used metaphorically in the middle of the 19th century [3]. At the beginning of the same century, the war theorist Carl von Clausewitz [4] defined the vanguard as a shock force whose primary task was the instantaneous destruction of the enemy. Spectating this linguistic sign of army strategy in literature does not remain a simple syntactical convergence but rather engrosses its aesthetic theory. The apology of provocation is intimately linked to militarism – the war – when the word leaves the space of metaphor to occupy that of aggressive actions. This concept of aggression does not intend to refer to the destructive and merciless action of the Futurists nor Tzara's apology for the slap in the face. We must understand the aggressive as an aesthetic cult of fright that seeks to satisfy an ambiguous pleasure through a presence with the character of shock.

In this sense, we cannot accept that the first avant-garde appeared in 1874 with the formation of the *Société Anonyme* group in Paris, which defended Impressionism. The rejection of Courbet and Manet by the *Salon des Indépendants* gave rise to a creative activity which, by speculating on reality, colour and the dissolving effects of light, only undertook the correction of form. The importance of this (supposed) avant-garde lies in its capacity to contribute to the loss of visible reality -in living the shipwreck of the so-called object. From there, we establish that Seurat's systematisation gave rise to Cézanne's ordinations, which would influence Cubism, and the latter would affect Geometric Abstraction. On the other side, there would be the current of Impressionism with the dissident genius of Van Gogh, who would bring to painting the existential drama that through *Les Nabis* group and Fauvism would reach figurative expressionist exasperation, Dadaism, Surrealism and the whole of Abstract Expressionism. In the 1960s-70s, new avant-garde movements appeared (with the adjective heroic being replaced by speculative) as a development of the two trends mentioned above.

On the one hand, New Figuration, Pop Art, Neo-Surrealism, Hyperrealism and Critical-Social Realism; on the other, New Abstraction, Op Art, Minimal Art, Kinetic-Luminescent Art, and Computer Art. With the latest trends, we have Ambient, Conceptual Art, Land art, Process art, and even Happening. The extensive list obliges us to consider three fundamental currents:

Constructivism, Informalism and Populism. The first is within a geometric order. The second is within the exploration of matter. And the third within a social testimony. This long trail continues to negate Dada and its surrealist consequence, demonstrating that we are still trapped in the institutionalised postulation of the historical and cultural *continuum* to maintain contradictory justifications of an ambiguous theoretical launching.

This launching comes from dragging along the Hegelian legacy of the split between *Kunstsissenschaft* and *Ästhetik*. The historical fact of the destruction of the aesthetic reflection of the classical world, with the replacement of Beauty as a supra category by the differentiated search for personal originality, entails a dissimulation of two levels.

- On the first level, originality functions as the predicate of a value judgement. That is, originality is the aesthetic quality that brings admiration.
- On the second level, it simply asserts that something is original with the sole intention of differentiating it from other results with other aesthetic qualities.

Here, we no longer find a value judgment but only a judgment of reality. Unfortunately, the latter is the one we usually explain in terms of the language used in analysing the aesthetic field of the avant-garde. Three intentional coincidences that unite them justify the previous trace of (supposedly) avant-garde movements: founding art as a specific language, as a means of social transformation, or as a means of expression of the subject, three foundations that Combalia [5] calls the analytical option, the constructive option, and the expressive option.

The fact that the normative value judgement no longer exists explains the use of the descriptive value judgement. Without a categorical realm with an underlying ideal aspiration, originality is defined relationally in the corresponding artistic context. However, the problem arises when we realise that originality is a concomitant element of artistic praxis, and then we decide to make it an essential and defining requirement. Kant determines originality as an attribute of genius. Fichte establishes the decisive formulation of the infinite absolute I AM: the spirit is like the God of the Bible, who creates everything out of nothing. That entails transferring the significance of artistic praxis to an activity's result. The artistic object is now what matters – consequently, its creative matrix – making it possible to accentuate the concept of originality to the point of pronouncing that of innovation. We have thus arrived at an unfortunately stereotyped cumulative ideology of avant-gardism, considering it simply as a linear conception of history where each subsequent moment surpasses the preceding one and novelty becomes the guiding criterion of its analysis.

### **Innovation is Misunderstood as a Potential for Shock**

This misconception of avant-gardism creates a view of art's becoming, such as that enthroned by Hughes [6]. There is a constant search for innovative work through identifying its shock potential, and for Hughes is Duchamp who achieves the most remarkable index. The Fontaine art object is chosen (discerned) for its significance (concept). But if, as we saw earlier, there is no standardised supra-categorical sphere, the term originality cannot take on an entitative sense. Consequently, the evaluative-prescriptive dimension in which Hughes finds himself is only constituted by an estimative plane because the gnoseological-descriptive aspect of the categorical realm –that systematises when something is original – cannot merge with the axiological aspect for lack of a valuational plane. This lack of a value judgement in favour of a

simple reality judgement (cognitive-denotative) causes a semantic shift of a metonymic type, where the part (surprise) is taken for the whole (innovation). The methodological approach is no longer to evaluate but to differ: to distinguish one thing from another by pointing out the difference between them based on the distinguisher's mood. We adopt the infinitive differs because it least demonstrates the distancing between the sender and the receiver. The demand for innovation in the artistic object causes it to appear on the screen, losing its property of mediational axis between the poetic-productive sub-process (*poiesis*) and the aesthetic-receptive sub-process (*aisthesis*). That is the cause of the actual powerlessness experienced by the receiver within the general process of communication. Thus, the concept "shock" — taken from Benjamin [7] — does not have its primary neurological meaning, and we understand it as a synonym for surprise.

Consequently, the question of innovation makes it impossible to conceive of a *continuum* of ruptures from which another concept of history would emerge because, unfortunately, how the fact of innovating is understood prevents the exact relationship of interweaving between past and present from being understood in the sense that Pareyson [8] makes explicit: It is a false rupture that looks at novelty for novelty's sake without worrying about substituting a new value for the old, that is to say, about founding a new tradition. There are always so-called renovators who understand innovation as a rupture: [...] traitors of value [...] they forget that congeniality is not an immediate expression of personal preferences. However, a complex exercise of *otherness* and a constant vocation for communication [...] the true rupture is that which, when the relation of congeniality with the past and tradition is lost, ends in pure artifice, and manifests itself in rejection and in starting over as the only ways of establishing the exact relation between the past and the present. (p. 42)

This paradoxical interweaving turns the rupture into the most significant recovery since its action establishes continuity. This approach to novelty neglects the study of aesthetic experience (phenomenology), and we take it from the perspective of an analysis such as Eagleton's [9], which dilutes the importance of aesthetic cognition for its own sake. This unbalancing of the brief life of sensible experience before its correlative act of reasoning leads to the dangerous connection between aesthetics and politics. Here, the scientific-technical phenomenon is attributed to the power to constitute the Cartesian aesthetic category, although Descartes did not claim to postulate any theory. They claim that what is appropriately Cartesian is to discern the plastic as a non-sensible, non-imaginative, non-intuitive reality; that is, an analytic-synthetic or abstract and transcendental reality. With this labarum to which we presuppose a semantic component of the sensible incarnation, Subirats [10] states that: The difference between a geometric surface of glass and steel and that of a page of Descartes lies in the fact that the former constitutes the physical medium in which we live and also think. The concept of Cartesian aesthetics makes it possible to establish that inner link between the formal and the historical, between the definition of a style and the general conception of society, which unravels the ultimate meaning of the avant-garde as the bearer of the cultural utopia of modernity. (p. 104)

This definition of the new that starts from the scientific-technical paradigm needs to be revised. It downplays Onto-aesthetics, Natural Aesthetics and Meta-aesthetics to focus the artistic phenomenon's relevance on an ambiguous macro-system of the General Theory of the Artistic Fact. This macro-system allows the approach to artistic praxis from the domain of

interdisciplinarity, which facilitates a tendency towards complex links bordering on the artistic fact itself with the intransigent obstinacy of institutionalising avant-gardism as an identity elevated to a universal sign of 20th-century modernity. That gave rise to the conception of the revolutionary or political avant-garde due to misunderstanding that first war metaphor.

Granting part of the task of renewing society to art is based on the empirical facts implied in the manifestos and proclamations of the different movements [11]. However, if we consult these documents in a way not mediated by the desire to talk about the modern project, we notice the constant appeal to nothingness. The spiritualist idealism of Kandinsky or Klee, the discovery of Kahnweiler's visual categories, the scientific jargon of the programmatic definitions of a (new) style (art) — Léger, Severini, Oud, van Doesburg, and Malewitch, the Bauhaus's ultimate of art as a projected action, Le Corbusier's Renaissance heritage of proportion — is the reading of an introduction of schemes without strict categories. It is to read vacuous linguistic expressions. We must not forget the question addressed by Ortega y Gasset [12]: if the purpose of that new art is the dehumanisation of the artistic, the inconsequence of art in the general context of life is its derivation. Faced with this separation of life from art, is it not fatuous to confer, as Subirats [13], a cultural objective on the avant-garde? The aesthetic-political gaze entails an incomprehension maintained until the so-called postmodern gaze, where (new) art is seen as a farce. Nevertheless, Ortega y Gasset [14] already discerned this misunderstood external attribute when he stated that a cubist painting could not claim the same kind of pathetic, almost religious admiration as a sculpture by Michelangelo without falling into the worst meaning of the word farce, because the new art ridicules art: current art is the mockery of itself.

### **The Inconsequentiality of Avant-Garde Art**

The vacuousness of this art concerning the exciting, touching, moving, disturbing (the pathetic) causes its inconsequence; it remains, without any other pretensions, as only art. In the face of this solitude — isolation — the fact of granting it a global consciousness within the secular sense of historical progress [15], is it not disproportionately dithyrambic? The relation of Aesthetics and Politics provokes statements with such a contradictory conceptualisation as Zérafra's [16], which metamorphoses the meaning of avant-garde to the dialectic (self)solution-(self)dissolution.

We should never consider a new art movement as a historical object. On the contrary, we must respect its character, its nature as a creative subject of forms, as well as the meaning and values that the artists gave to their work of innovation. The will of an avant-garde is essentially one of rupture and foundation: of destruction and construction united, aimed at promoting formal and political revolutions in the broad sense of the term. (p. 10).

Any rupture it claims to find, any destruction it aims to build, or any other aspiration of destiny can only be considered a historical object. The intonation of the ideology-avant-garde relation as a linear and cumulative process by overcoming is nothing other than a hypostatic affinity to scientific-technical progress. Even Sebrel [17], the most current voice of positivist evolutionism and laudatory of the values of the idea of progress, is forced to affirm that this idea is alien to the avant-garde conception of 20th-century art when he encounters Duchamp's ready-made and the happenings as an example of momentary existence, of the pure instant of a deliberately anti-progressive absolute present that absolutizes discontinuity over continuity because it is not interested in the future and rejects the past, without the integration of which there can be

no idea of progress. It is not difficult to unmask Sebreli as a non-dogmatic Marxist attentive to how he confronts Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault or Lévi-Strauss; for this reason, he cannot do without the concept of progress. Thus, for Sebreli [18], art would also progress, and it would do so thanks to the invention of new instruments, new materials and new techniques for working them since these would provide greater artistic expression and, consequently, a broader sensibility. However, ambiguity arises from the concepts of development and progress.

Our present conjecture of this revision of the avant-garde concept does not pretend to be driven by Habermas's anti-historical scepticism nor to supplant science with philosophy. It aims not to fall into the hidden positivist deformation of the meaning of history. It is necessary to remember that the assertion that philosophy cannot risk theorising without knowing the results of science is absurd. For example, it is worth recalling fractal theory. This theory allows for creating a system through which the computer elaborates a subtle, infinite, frizzy space similar to a mountain formation. Similarly, in these artificial landscapes, the computer can grow plants, dry them or let them burn in imaginary flames. It even manages to establish the graphic algorithm that allows the development of the image of trees in the Black Forest [19].

It can be seen that the computer-imitated ruler quickly produces an infinite, finely crumpled or torn, spatially-plastic-looking rock formation. Like these fractal mountains, plant worlds can be grown on the computer with so-called *graftals* in artificial landscapes, dried or burned in imaginary flames. Many people have even succeeded in developing graphical algorithms for the trees of the Black Forest. (p. 283).

Virtual creations such as these should not bring about the current generalised distancing of the philosophical approach from the functional normative projection of science. Using the computer has only adjectivally modified the noun of the contemporary creator. We express fractal geometry through algorithms, that is, procedural rules and instructions that require the help of the computer to convert them into shapes and structures [20]. These structures demonstrate the possibility of encoding chaos. Any presence that we cannot reduce to the elements of Euclidean geometry, we can reduce to the elements of fractal geometry, which, using rules of algorithmic calculation, identifies the significant unity of that presence. Once we know this algorithmic reason, we can define the original figure with an infinite sequence (without mathematical limit) of repetitions of the fractal figure. Doesn't this process seem like a numerical version of Hegel's infinity? If the mathematical curiosities of nature researchers corner philosophy, a dangerous kind of theodicy arises.

## CONCLUSION

In the dynamics of contemporary art, we can observe the lack of reflection on art itself through its material form (Shape), what is visible in its content. Something difficult to understand if we consider that the guiding thread of our learning in artistic disciplines is the expressive form (Form), the result of organising what is received by the eyes so that the human mind can grasp it as content; that is, the materialisation of the idea. Teaching experience shows us that this is the most beneficial attitude towards artistic fact, because the theories that start from Hegel to relate the expressive level of art to the socio-political environment do not work, or rather, they will not work alone because they do not allow us to understand the effect that a work of art produces on us, and with theories based on an expressive-sociological knot we do not know how to justify this apprehension.

Any approach to the art object can take ten sides: positivist, historicist, formalist, iconological, psychoanalyst, gestalt, phenomenological, structuralist, semiotic and sociological. However, in each of them, paths often cross depending on how you walk. However, these diverse views have something crucial in common: none of them can distance themselves from the material form (Shape).

This oblivion may be because we evaluate the work of art from philosophical reflection rather than from the analysis of form. The ease with which we usually introduce philosophy could be because the experience of a work of art will always depend on our cognitive baggage; that is, we see things that may differ from the views of others, and therefore, such a private fact cannot be evoked by the form alone, but only by that which expresses this form. But we will only be able to agree between our different visions when we seek to understand the expressive form starting from the materialisation of the idea. If, in theory, we cannot accept elements of coincidence between matter and idea, practice insists on evidencing at least the possibility of finding significant values. Is this different when the expert authenticates the authorship of an unsigned work?

During the 20th century, no one signed a work of art that caused a surprise that caused us shock and, therefore, left us unable to find significant value in the work of art. The avant-garde theory of the twentieth century gave this goal to originality through its war metaphor: to destroy any meaning of tradition and create a work of art from zero value. Perhaps Yves Klein succeeded in his monochrome paintings entitled IKB (International Klein Blue) since monochrome eliminates the formal value because the shape needs the difference of colour to appear before us. So, for that International Klein Blue (IKB) colour to have nothing to do with tradition, it should have a value of zero for us; that is, it should be a new blue. Art critics admitted this, and art historians corroborated this over the years until a multidisciplinary analysis of the blue coatings of their works of art [21] showed that their blue was not new but the most common of its time.

We all know the subtlety that tasters can achieve in differentiating taste varieties. They are able to pinpoint the kind of wine or tobacco by tiny details during the tasting and, sometimes, even say on the side of the gorge where the grapes had grown from which the given wine was then prepared. Much more popular is the subtlety that can achieve the distinctive sensitivity of sounds in musicians, who are able to pick up pitch differences imperceptible to regular listeners. We know that dyers can distinguish between fifty and sixty shades of black and that steel smelters distinguish the subtlest shades of the incandescent flux of metal because they indicate the slightest change of strange mixtures. This differentiation is inaccessible to the outside observer because it is acquired with the experience accumulated in the process of life. Would not valuing the idea for its materialization have prevented misunderstandings like that of Michelangelo de la Sistine, whose chiaroscuro effect we attributed to his sculptural training, while reality concealed an extraordinary chromaticity only masked by the smoke of the candles? The misunderstanding in the theoretical construction of the avant-garde concept appears by neglecting the body during lived experience. Let us remember that if we are aware of our *indivuidity*, it is thanks to the fact that we are psychosomatic individuals. The work of art that seeks the avant-garde should destroy this consciousness, but it seems that it only succeeds in initiating a tendency of art towards rhetoric that reaches the present day, where theoretical constructions seem to be the only works of art. Based on the fact that we understand ourselves

as one individual through our subjection to what we see, we should understand that looking without feeling is a contradiction.

## References

- [1]. Hegel, G. W. Friedrich. *Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*. Vol. 13. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 13. (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 613): p. 145-156.
- [2]. Baudelaire, Charles. *Edgar Allan Poe*. 2nd Ed. Barcelona: Fontamara, 1981. (Alejandría): p. 135, p. 143.
- [3]. Baudelaire, Charles. *Mi corazón al desnudo y otros papeles íntimos*. Madrid: Visor, 1983. (Visor de Poesía, 167): p. 57
- [4]. Clausberg, Karl. "Am Ende Kunstgeschichte?". In: Dietrich Reimer. *Kunstgeschichte-aber wie? Zehn Themen und Beispiele*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1989: p. 430.
- [5]. Combalia Dexeus, Victoria (et. al.). *El descrédito de las vanguardias artísticas*. Barcelona: Blume, 1980. (BB, 3): p. 115.
- [6]. Hughes, Robert. *The shock of the new. Art and the century of change*. Updated and enlarged edition. London: Thames and Hudson, 1991.
- [7]. Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974: p. 503.
- [8]. Pareyson, Luigi. *Conversaciones de estética*. Madrid: Visor, 1987. (La balsa de la Medusa, 11).
- [9]. Eagleton, Terry. *The ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990: p. 15.
- [10]. Subirats, Eduardo. *El final de las vanguardias*. Barcelona: Antropos, 1989. (Palabra Plástica, 13).
- [11]. Subirats, Eduardo. *La flor y el cristal. Ensayos sobre arte y arquitectura modernos*. Barcelona: Antropos, 1986.
- [12]. Ortega Y Gasset, José. *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos de estética*. 9a ed. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1976 [1925]. (El Arquero): p. 62.
- [13]. Subirats, Eduardo. *La flor y el cristal. Ensayos sobre arte y arquitectura modernos*. Barcelona: Antropos, 1986: p. 227.
- [14]. Ortega Y Gasset, José. *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos de estética*. 9a ed. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1976 [1925]. (El Arquero): p. 60.
- [15]. Subirats, Eduardo. *La flor y el cristal. Ensayos sobre arte y arquitectura modernos*. Barcelona: Antropos, 1986: p. 85.
- [16]. Zéaffa, Michel. "Pre-avant-gardes et avant-gardes: Le tournant français du XXè siècle". In: Zbigniew Folejewski (ed.). *Les années folles. Les mouvements avant-gardistes européens*. Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université, 1981. (Les Conférences Vanier).
- [17]. Sebreli, Juan José. *El asedio a la modernidad. Crítica del relativismo cultural*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1992: p.98.
- [18]. Sebreli, Juan José. *El asedio a la modernidad. Crítica del relativismo cultural*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1992.
- [19]. Clausberg, Karl. "Am Ende Kunstgeschichte?". In: Dietrich Reimer. *Kunstgeschichte-aber wie? Zehn Themen und Beispiele*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1989.

- [20]. Jürgens, Harmunt; Peigen, Heiz Otto; Saupe, Dietmar. "El lenguaje de los fractales". In: *Investigación y Ciencia*. 1990, núm. 169, pág. 46.
- [21]. Fortuny-Agramunt, Jaume. Analysis of the Coherence between the Pictorial Process of Yves Klein and the Idea of Duplicity in his Monochromes of the Series IKB-International Klein Blue. *BRAC Barcelona, Research, Art, Creation*, 5(1). Barcelona, 2017: p. 92-125. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/brac.2017.2509>.