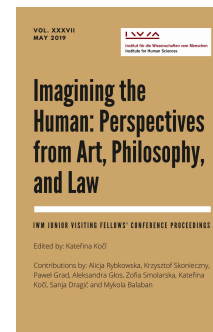


Philosophical Roots of the Avant-Garde

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the outcomes of my doctoral research on philosophical inspirations and borrowings in the early avant-garde art, emphasizing particularly – due to space limitations – its more general conclusions about the meaning of philosophy for the arts and vice versa. First, I describe the underlying ideas and assumptions of the work; then, I briefly outline the methods and provide an example of their use in a close reading of Hegel and Malevich in the context of the latter's famous *Black Square* painting; and finally, I move to the examination of the findings of my study in the field of art philosophy.

Research outline

The doctoral project “Philosophical roots of the avant-garde” was an interdisciplinary attempt to discuss the mutual influence of modern art and philosophy as well as its social and cultural consequences up until today. Under the term “avant-garde” I understand an intellectual formation, consisting primarily of visual artists, who in the years 1905-1930 actively searched for new and ground-breaking artistic solutions and identified this search as their main artistic task. They are distinguished from other artists through (1) their collective identity and common goals, strengthened by (2) numerous artistic groups, international exhibitions and joint publications and (3) their original aesthetic orientation.

These three characteristics allow us to understand the early avant-garde as an attitude related more to a certain ideology than to a certain style. While the second point indicates issues important for art history, points 1 and 3 introduce issues relevant to the history of ideas. Such a perspective means moving from the analyses of formal and technical similarities between the avant-garde artists (abundant and satisfying, if not exhaustive) towards investigations into ideological and worldview similarities between the artists and

other intellectuals and thinkers and helps to consider the avant-garde as such and not as a set of exciting but overtly particularized and contradicting-isms, thus facilitating grasping its wider cultural consequences and overcoming the contemporary critique of the avant-garde project.

The rapid development of many new artistic movements at the very beginning of the 20th century raises the question about social, cultural, and intellectual factors that made it possible for these innovative and often radical practices to be considered art. When we look into the artistic evolution of the early avant-garde artists and compare, for instance, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* with his earlier landscapes painted in a neo-impressionist manner, the attempts to explain such a radical step taken by the artist solely in terms of style seem to be far too reductive. As much as the break with representation marks a milestone in the constitution of the avant-garde, it cannot be seen as its culminating point for a number of reasons. Firstly, abstraction was always present in Western art in form of decorative patterns. Secondly, it is not typical for all the avant-garde artists and movements (one needs to remember Picasso's and Braque's efforts to maintain the link to reality even in their most hermetic cubist period by including real-life objects such as newspapers in their paintings). Thirdly, it departs too radically from the mimetic tradition to be understood as a merely technical or stylistic development due to metaphysical connotations of mimesis established in Platonism.

Trying to understand this departure, I argue, we should take into account the mindset of the progressive artists that made it possible for them not only to conceive and execute their ground-breaking works but also provided them with daring to label and exhibit them as art. The answer that I examine is offered by philosophy of that time, which could serve as a source of inspiration for the early avant-garde artists due to its growing interest in matters of individual freedom, subjectivity and critical assessment of their traditional understanding, and offered models of emancipatory, revolutionary and critical attitudes. Hence, I put forward the philosophy of the avant-garde understood not as a philosophical analysis of a certain phenomenon but as a synthesis of philosophical inspirations and borrowings made by the artists themselves.

That is not to say, however, that philosophy directly influenced the artists of the avant-garde or that it made their work possible. The methodological challenge of cultural history is to account for a certain intellectual *milieu* without retrospectively ascribing to it a certain causal power. Rather, it aims at careful studying the past in accordance with the understanding of itself it could have. Therefore, I do not claim that any avant-garde artists were essentially, say, a Hegelianist or a Schopenhauerist but I try to show how the philosophies of the two – and of many other thinkers – provided themes later employed by the avant-garde artists under the label of their ingenuity and originality.

A close reading of major philosophical figures of the 19th and the early 20th century and a comparative analysis of their writings allow us to discover a set of topics and beliefs that could shape avant-garde attitudes among the artists and provide them with a theoretical background for their work as well as a justification for their proclaimed turn against the immediate past. Ironically, it also makes it clear that such a turn was not possible on a scale desired by many artists. However, my intention was not to point out the delusional

or utopian character of the avant-garde project; rather, the research was designed to facilitate presenting it as meaningful and worth revisiting. A deepened scrutiny of the links between the avant-garde attitude and the philosophical thought that could induce it casts a new light not only on the avant-garde itself but also on the contemporary art and philosophy with their ever existing tendency to revisit, revise and re-evaluate the tradition in order to make it still attractive and engaging. Therefore, in the last part of the article I will also discuss the possibility of employing the avant-garde heritage into philosophical investigations of today.

The most important objectives of my project were:

- Presenting the historical avant-garde as a context-specific intellectual attitude which was symptomatic for more general social and cultural tendencies and which was strongly influenced by the philosophy of its time,
- Re-evaluating the avant-garde legacy and stressing its overall positive impact on arts as well as its continuous influence on the contemporary culture despite its sometimes critical reception,
- Describing the avant-garde attitude as a set of critical, creative, prospective forms of social engagement and an open call towards more courage in various forms of creativity.

Methods

All these objectives were based on the assumption that the emphasis that the avant-garde artists themselves put on the intellectual aspect of their work is the key to its better understanding. The unprecedented richness of theoretical writings by the artists, considerably exceeding technical guidelines and insiders' exchange of ideas, suggests the right track to study the avant-garde and justifies considering its theoretical aspects as equally important as the artistic practices. I chose to study the "philosophical roots of the avant-garde" in two ways: firstly, by reading the philosophers of the 19th and the early 20th century in order to find links between their concepts of man, society, freedom, individuality and creativity and the concepts submitted by the artists. The second axis of the study was constituted by reading the avant-garde authors in search of actual philosophical influences. These were complemented by a careful confrontation of the conclusions drawn out of comparative reading with examples of the avant-garde works of art to control the outcomes and see how these works could incorporate and present philosophical ideas.

Since I aimed to study the influence of philosophy upon art, I assumed following proportions: I concentrated on ten philosophers whose ideas are particularly close to the avant-garde field of interests or represent particularly important problematics (in order of discussion: Wilhelm Dilthey, Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Max Stirner, Karl Marx, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud) and I compared their writings with possibly highest number of

avant-garde theoretical works (approximately 80 artists representing such tendencies as: Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Suprematism, Neoplasticism, Dadaism and Surrealism).

On all three stages I combined genealogical and hermeneutical approach with thick description as these methods seem to be most promising in accounting for the wide cultural and intellectual background of the phenomena in discussion. The criterion to choose philosophers was, above all, their impact on next generations of thinkers and educated readers and their actual presence in the early avant-garde theory. Furthermore, I decided to discuss those artists and movements which retained their distinguished position in the world of art thanks to their originality. That explains restraining the study to international and sourcing artistic groups. Theoretical activity of the artists representing particular groups and movements very often translated into their inner hierarchy and their submission to the persona of an intellectual leader (such as Marinetti in Futurism, Mondrian in De Stijl, or Breton in Surrealism). Those leaders became also the primary reference point in my work.

However, the artists typically learned about philosophers in a mediated way, which, often combined with a lack of basic philosophical education, could lead to some misunderstandings or misconceptions. Nevertheless, I believe that the mode of reception is also very instructive and can say a lot about the receptor's attitude and so I saw those distortions of the original conception not as an obstacle in my work but as an expression of a liberal and spontaneous interpretation done by the artists accordingly to their own interests and beliefs. Therefore, it was more important to present a certain community of ideas in order to emphasize the role of philosophy in forming the avant-garde worldview than to historically prove actual readings or studies. Interesting and plausible parallels can be even more instructive than proven links because they are more contextually sensitive.

Such an approach leads to difficulties with rightly estimating this plausibility, with reducing anachronisms (since I wanted to understand the avant-garde from the perspective of what preceded it but I am inevitably familiar with the philosophy that succeeded it as well) and with avoiding taking certain claims at face value (it was for instance fashionable at the time to state that one reads Stirner and Nietzsche as a kind of provocation). Using the works of art as the third source of knowledge of the avant-garde attitude which, not mediated through language are more direct and veracious, was one of the ways of avoiding these difficulties as much as possible.

Outcomes

Close reading of the philosophers who are often mentioned in the context of the avant-garde art of the years 1905-1930 showed how selective and non-exhaustive these mentions often are and allowed me to present less obvious links between the art of that time and particular moments of philosophical thought, the similarities between the understanding of a spiritual journey in Hegel and Malevich and the risks it entails being one of them.

The art of the avant-garde turns out to be a symptom of more general social and cultural tendencies, such as emancipation, modernization and better education. Carol Duncan in her account of the early avant-garde functionalizes that context by placing it within an even broader sphere of liberal thought. Signaling the importance of innovativeness and originality both for avant-garde artists and art historians studying their works, she claims this “obsession” to be instrumental in rendering liberal ideas real: “By celebrating artistic freedom, our cultural institutions ‘prove’ that ours is a society in which all freedom is cherished and protected, since, in our society, all freedom is conceived as individual freedom. Thus vanguard paintings, as celebrated instances of freedom, function as icons of individualism, objects that silently turn the abstractions of liberal ideology into visible and concrete experience” (Duncan 1982, 294).

Duncan seems to be convinced that when something is ideological, it always means it is not – it cannot – be true and that it essentially misrepresents the reality but she does not explain why it should be so. Despite the negative repercussions of Duncan’s understanding of the early avant-garde and its meaning – that I use here as an example of its wider criticism for its eagerness to veil the aspects of reality that do not conform to the avant-garde standard of freedom, creativity and power – I would like to defend the idea of freedom in modern art as not merely serving social and political purposes. The topicality of the tendencies mentioned above – emancipation, modernization, popular education – points out to the continuous importance of the historical avant-garde in our culture and the need to revise its negative picture, formed in postmodernism (basing on allegations of lack of originality and a utopian character), postcolonialism (allegations of instrumentalization of the art of other cultures) and feminism with its allegation of patriarchal relations in artistic groups and a systematic marginalization of female artists’ work. As true and significant those allegations are, they all have an exclusive character and concentrate only on one aspect of the avant-garde without grasping it as an intellectual entity. As a result of the initial definition of the avant-garde as a worldview formation that can be fruitfully confronted with philosophical worldviews it is possible to withstand the dominant trend to understand the avant-garde retrospectively and blame it for not having the contemporary consciousness and to present it from the perspective of what preceded it. This allows not only to stress the originality and innovativeness of the avant-garde but also, equally notably, of philosophy that became an important source of inspiration for its artists.

The set of values typical for the avant-garde formation, such as non-conformism, critical thinking, courage, creativity and innovativeness is still highly valued in the Western culture and seen as an important characteristic of a European citizen. Deep philosophical roots of the avant-garde project make it a meaningful and compelling legacy that exceeds the limits of aesthetics or art history and co-forms different variants of the European identity. Stressing the mutual influence (whilst the impact of art on the ways of exercising philosophical reflection is typically ignored) shows how the avant-garde can become a model of engaged, empathetic, perhaps even vulnerable philosophy that appreciates detail, otherness, and the unobvious. The question remains, then, whether philosophy missed its chance to form an avant-garde on its own: it prepared the ground for changes but then the artists in discussion employed the themes of rebellion, courage, personal

engagement and non-conformism more successfully or, at least, more visibly. They instrumentalized the philosophical narrative for their own purposes but the outcomes of this instrumentalization can also be instructive, especially in the times of philosophical and artistic celebrities and eventization of art and philosophy that calls for a more genuine reflection upon their meaning in the contemporary society.

To sum up, the theoretical model of the avant-garde attitude that I developed during my work can be used as a practical tool to better understand complex motivations and hopes underlying social phenomena that share a subversive and resistant characteristic. Owing to this, theoretical studies in philosophy and history of modern art can also be applied in social sciences, allow to open new perspectives in the humanities and contradict the sometimes uttered conviction that they are practically useless. On the contrary, the role of the humanities is to continually sustain the awareness of the past and to offer tools of critical analysis at the same time – which was also the underlying objective of my dissertation.

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