

Martin Puchner

*Poetry of the Revolution. Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*

Princeton University Press 2006, 315 pp.

The genre of the manifesto belongs to the key elements of avant-garde textuality. As such, the manifesto has received considerable attention in recent avant-garde research. Many articles, chapters in general studies on the avant-garde, several collections of essays, monographs and annotated anthologies have been devoted to the manifesto in the past decades. Martin Puchner's book on the avant-garde manifesto is a latecomer in this context, published some ten years after a wave of *Manifestantismus* struck in particular continental European avant-garde research. As in the case of any late arrival, the main question is self-evidently: what adds Puchner to already existing literature? The answer must be rather ambivalent. Puchner's book definitely fills a lacuna in the Anglophone historiography of the avant-garde. Although some anthologies with avant-garde manifestos have been published in English in the past years, most studies on the manifesto were published in German and French.

Here, Puchner's book makes continental European research available to an Anglophone readership by reproducing the main topoi of studies on the avant-garde manifesto published in the past decades, like the interrelation and friction between the political and aesthetic in the manifesto, the formative effects of the manifesto on its authors and readers as a very specific textual medium, and last but not least concerning aspects of performativity. The pivotal role that Puchner attributes to the *Communist Manifesto* in the genesis of the avant-garde genre of the manifesto repeats basically suggestions first made by Claude Abastado in his preface of a special issue of the post-1945 review *Littérature* on the manifesto, published in 1980, in which the manifesto as literary genre is reflected. In its discussion of the *Communist Manifesto* Puchner's book differs from other studies on the manifesto in the context of research on the aesthetic avant-garde by summarizing extensively elder social and political-historical research on Marx, Engels and their manifesto.

On the whole, Puchner's book is, hence, a comprehensive survey of previous work by others, despite its claim to be "brilliantly original" (according to an advertorial blurb on the cover of the book, authorised by Marjorie Perloff). One might see this claim as a common element of the advertorial superlativistic rhetoric that garnish American publications – and ignore it. And it might be laudable that the Austrian Puchner acts as a cultural intermediary and translating interpreter, as someone who makes research published in German and French

accessible to a linguistically impeded and limited Anglophone readership with little knowledge of other languages. However, less laudable is the partly sloppy and inaccurate, partly otherwise rather problematic way, in which Puchner (mis)represents *and* suppresses previous research accomplished by others (and himself!) or forgets to credit other researchers for the research they did and Puchner obviously appropriated for his own book.

This dimension of Puchner book is obvious, if one just takes a careful look at his bibliographic references. The bibliography of *Poetry of the Revolution* is simply incomplete, not only because Puchner apparently missed certain titles, but also because he ‘forgot’ to include them.

Of course, blanket coverage of existing literature cannot be expected of any author, but if, for example, the futurist manifesto receives broad coverage, as in this book, it can only be regarded as a deficiency, when previous monographs on the subject are ignored or at least: not mentioned. Apart from smaller articles, Puchner misses substantial monographs like Jean-Pierre A. de Villers’s *Le Premier manifeste du futurisme* (Édition de l’Université: Ottawa, 1986) and Friedrich Wilhelm Malsch’s *Künstlermanifeste. Studien zu einem Aspekt moderner Kunst am Beispiel des italienischen Futurismus* (Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften: Weimar, 1997). Likewise, Puchner criticizes Peter Bürger as a theoretician of the avant-garde, who apparently ignored the special relevance of the manifesto genre, although Bürger devoted a large section of his book *Der französische Surrealismus* (Athenäum: Frankfurt/Main, 1971) to the manifesto – through references in books, which Puchner *did* consult.

Puchner might have ‘missed’ Villers, Malsch and Bürger, but he seems to ‘forget’ other titles partly due to sloppiness, partly in a rather deliberate way – it seems. An example of the first type of forgetfulness is the fact that Puchner forgot to include a reference to the afore-mentioned preface by Claude Abastado, mentioned by Puchner as an important orientation : “I am able to build on the pioneering work of Claude Abastado and Marjorie Perloff, who first moved the art manifesto as genre into the center of attention” (p. 71). Abastado is not included, however, in Puchner’s bibliography, at least not in his bibliography in *Poetry of the Revolution*.

There are, though, more missing references – significant references. Seven years ago, Puchner published an article in a collection of essays edited by Dietrich Scheunemann, *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*, published by Rodopi (Amsterdam/Atlanta) as volume 15 of the series *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*. Puchner’s article, “Screeching Voices: Avant-Garde Manifestos in the Cabaret”, contained already several elements of his recent book and – what is

more – his article indicates the sources of many of these elements in his notes and bibliography (of course: common academic practice, basically no subject for discussion). Here, in ‘Screeching Voices’, Abastado was actually not only mentioned in Puchner’s text, but also listed in his bibliography. Besides, the article includes references to another volume of essays: “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*”. *Die europäische Avantgarde und ihre Manifeste*, edited by Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt, 1997).

In ‘Screeching Voices’, six years before his *Poetry of the Revolution*, Puchner’s references to this book relate among others to issues concerning the political dimension of the manifesto and aspects of performativity, which Puchner presents in the introduction of *Poetry of the Revolution* (pp. 4–5) as new insights and perspectives of his own. For some odd reason any reference to “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*” misses in the notes and bibliography of *Poetry of the Revolution*. And not only the references to this book are missing. In *Poetry of the Revolution*, also a clear reference is missing to the article “Screeching Voices” (although there is a vague hint at this article in the acknowledgements). Here Puchner thanks Rodopi for the permission to recycle his article, yet without any bibliographic data, unlike some other previous publications by himself, which are included in the bibliography of the book. Apparently, Puchner saw no necessity to inform the readers of *Poetry of the Revolution* about his preceding article. Of course, Puchner might have the right to suppress the title of his own article (whether his other publisher, Rodopi, likes the omission, is certainly a different matter). But in the same move, he also suppresses literature he used in the article, which he recycled in his book.

Apart from this problematic procedure, in which credits for other researchers are turned under the carpet, the question rises here: why are these references missing in *Poetry of the Revolution*?

Several scenarios seem possible. Did Puchner decide on hindsight not to use this apparently irrelevant studies? Crass sloppiness might be another possibility. The fact that Puchner mentions Abastado in his main text, but somehow omits a bibliographic reference could point in this direction.

Another reason might be that these omitted references are part of an attempt to construct and inscribe the book in another, local and therefore maybe more rewarding research tradition. As quoted before, Puchner refers ostentatiously to Marjorie Perloff as a major orientation. Although Perloff is not completely absent in the late twentieth-century European research literature on the manifesto, and although her book *The Futurist Moment* (1986) is undoubtedly a

very in seminal publication on futurism and the avant-garde, her reflections in *The Futurist Moment* in the chapter “Violence and Precision. The Manifesto as Art Form” did not play a substantial role in the German and French written research on the manifesto of the late twentieth century. They did neither in Puchner’s article “Screeching Voices”. Looking at the bibliographic references of this article, Puchner still stands in the European research tradition and shows even an unmistakably critical distance towards Perloff. No praise for Perloff only, as in his recent book. Apparently, Puchner changed his opinion – and why shouldn’t he? “Notre tête est ronde pour permettre à la pensée de changer de direction”, as Francis Picabia wrote in 1922.

Reason for this change of mind is most likely that Puchner decided to position his book in an American tradition and place it in the context of the study of modernism instead of in the framework of European avant-garde studies, to which also Scheunemann’s book belongs. Puchner lives in the United States, so: who can put him in the wrong for that? “Wes’ Brot ich ess’, des’ Lied ich sing’” – is an old German popular dictum. Two other recent publications mentioned by Puchner as precursors of his own book, Janet Lyon’s *Manifestoes. Provocations of the Modern* (Cornell: Ithaca 1999) and Luca Somigli’s *Legitimizing the Artist: Manifest Writing and European Modernism* (University of Toronto Press 2003) also place the manifesto in this modernist framework.

In his introduction Puchner, indeed, inscribes his book in an assumedly primarily American tradition of research on the manifesto, according to Puchner pioneered by Marjorie Perloff (p. 4). This becomes obvious in a footnote to the introduction. After his praise for Perloff and mentioning of Lyon and Somigli (Abastado is only mentioned later in the book), Puchner places the following footnote (pp. 263–4):

The recent interest in manifestos extends to European scholarship, including a collection of manifestos edited by Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde (1919–1938)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995). A recent study of the historical avant-garde and its manifestos by Hanno Ehrlicher, *Die Kunst der Zerstörung: Gewaltphantasien und Manifestationspraktiken europäischer Avantgarden* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), unfortunately has come to my attention too late to be substantially integrated in the present book, even though there are many common areas of interest as well as methodological differences among our projects.

This remark gives a hilarious misrepresentation of the actual research situation, when Puchner writes that “recent interest in manifestos extends to European scholarship”. The suggestion that American research also fanned out to Europe can only be seen as a carnival mirror distorting true proportions, since there cannot be any doubt whatsoever that research on the manifesto was mainly an European affair in previous decades.

In this context, Puchner’s remark leads to another problem. Whereas Puchner suggests complete coverage of previous research by pointing at “European scholarship” as well, Puchner does the opposite. There can be little doubt that he suppresses at this point consciously the previously mentioned collection of essays on the manifesto edited by Asholt and Fährnders, “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*”. How else can one explain the fact that he mentions their anthology of manifestos, but ‘forgets’ their essay collection, which he still used extensively a few years ago? (And which is available in the library of Puchner’s employer, Columbia University in New York, unlike the anthology, in case Puchner does not possess a private copy of the essay collection).

The fact that Puchner in *Poetry of the Revolution* does not mention “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*” does fit in his policy to upgrade American modernism research as the essential hot spot of manifesto studies. By suppressing the title he suppresses research by some dozen European scholars, who were drawing on the research of many more European scholars (and just a few Americans).

However, Puchner does not only reduce the role European avant-garde research in the study of the manifesto, he also disposes of rivaling researchers. By forgetting about “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*” (and other titles), Puchner can also skip the fact that this and other essay collections contain information, data and reflections, which he prefers to present as his own observations and findings or at least *not* as the findings of another scholar. For questions concerning the performativity of the manifesto, for example, Puchner drew in his article “Screeching Voices” still quite extensively on a contribution by another Austrian scholar, Birgit Wagner, in “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*”. In *Poetry of the Revolution*, Birgit Wagner has vanished together with “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*” – and Puchner can present reflections on the performativity of the manifesto as his own domain. Who reads German scholarly books in Anglophone academia, if not in English translation? So – why mention Wagner’s discussion of the possibilities to apply Austin’s concept of performativity to the manifesto, if you are doing the same, but now in English? Since Puchner argues *almost* the same as Wagner did in “*Die ganze Welt ist eine*

*Manifestation*”, a reference to Wagner would have necessitated an in-depth, detailed discussion of her approach and the advantages of the different approach by Puchner. By avoiding any reference to her, Puchner can argue without inconvenient detours to research, which his average reader will never miss or discover. Unlike the book by Hanno Ehrlicher, who was never mentioned before by Puchner, Puchner could hardly deny in *Poetry of the Revolution* that he just missed “*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*”, which he extensively quoted and discussed in “Screeching voices”, with the apparent result that this and other titles seems to have been brushed under the carpet.

A detailed discussion of other, previous research could have been interesting for some specialists in the field, but would have prevented Puchner’s book to be “the authoratative history and elegant reinterpretation of the manifest form”, as another blurb on the cover of *Poetry of the Revolution* claims. Puchner dediced for authorative elegancy instead.

Besides, such a discussion would have undermined yet another claim on the cover of Puchner’s book: “Few scholars have sustained a close and equal attention to the historical and formal trajectories of both the political manifesto and the aesthetic manifesto.” – In fact quite a lot scholars did so in the past decades. A discussion of the outcome of their research would have shown that *Poetry of the Revolution* places some new accents, but offers first of all an English-written inventory of research and reflection previously published in particular in French and German. Now, the uninformed reader might be happy to have an elegant rough guide to the manifesto, unhindered by complicating discussions on the square milimeter (or inch – to keep to U.S. standards). Some others might wonder whether Puchner will devote his next book to the performativity of Pierre Ménard.

Hubert van den Berg