

Richard Murphy

*Theorizing the Avant-Garde. Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*

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Once upon a time, let's say two decades ago, the concept and phenomenon of the "avant-garde" seemed to carry such a heavy historical and ideological burden that practicing artists and writers tended to shy away from the denomination. The very idea of a vanguard, of a forerunner heading towards a future utopia and a future readership, seemed too naive, too much aligned with evolutionary models of history or simplified conceptions of artistic and political progress, to fit in with the then prevalent postmodernist take on things.

Admittedly, the forms, the methods, and the critique of bourgeois society pursued by the (so-called) historical avant-garde could sometimes be recharged and reframed as postmodern issues *avant la lettre*. No one wanted, for example, to lose the possibility of putting the name of Duchamp on the agenda. But, the A-word as such was often bracketed, and to a certain extent it seemed like the attack on the (so-called) neo-avantgarde of the 1960s, staged by critics such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Peter Bürger, had had an effect. To a similar extent, this effect could also be felt in the critical discourse and in the academic community, who tended to repeat the artist's gesture, and retreat from this field of combat and military metaphors – of course, as always, with certain more or less brilliant exceptions.

However, things were soon to change. And the change can be discerned from different viewpoints. My own Swedish perspective must take into account a sudden burst of interest in the poetic avant-garde of the 1960s, which was materialized among literary critics and poets (in the art community the chronology is different) in the years preceding the new millennium. A couple of years before that, Hal Foster had published his book *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996), which levelled criticism against Bürger's judgement on the neo-avant-garde, while, at the same time paving the way for the idea of an avant-garde *tradition*, by articulating the structural conditions for the *repetition* of forms and methods employed by Futurism and Dada. Any which way you look, this was a time of signs of change.

When reading Richard Murphy's book, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde. Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*, today, a book that was published in 1999, it is easy to historicize it as an example of this broader attempt to re-read and re-evaluate the ideas as well as the practices of an avant-

garde art. It is a study cloaked in the theoretical concepts and approaches of “postmodernism”, and it takes the form of legitimating procedure, at least in some respects. When today the avant-garde is being turned into the object of a new *historiographic* practice, focused, for example, on the mapping of different movements and networks, and on the *discursive constructions* of the avant-garde, the building of such a theoretical model might seem a bit untimely.

On the other hand, the strength of Murphy’s book, seems to me to lie in this immersion in a certain historical conjuncture. That is, its most productive moments appear in its postmodern re-articulations of, not the least, a specific movement within the general sea change of the arts in the early 20th century. This movement is, as the title of the book declares, “expressionism” – one of many fugitive and deceptive designations in the context of modern literature. The noun can easily be transformed into an adjective and be applied on a lot of art and literature. But what writers, and what works, should be incorporated in an expressionist movement from the 1910s and 1920s, is more of an open question. Of course we have the general criteria of subjective expressiveness, formulated by Murphy as “the forceful expression of subjectivity which always constitutes the essential and defining power behind their [the expressionists’] work” (89). But this, on the other hand, seems too general a description to demarcate a movement.

The starting point of Murphy’s study is a discussion of Peter Bürger’s influential and much criticized study, *Theorie der Avant-Garde* (1974). Since expressionism is not addressed in Bürger’s book, this is of course a touchstone for Murphy, who also, immediately, declares, that the avant-garde is a “much more ambiguous and heterogeneous phenomenon” (3) than what is suggested by the German critic. But, even so, and even though criticism is launched towards Bürger’s theory, his definition of the avant-garde as a critique of aestheticism as well as an attempt to sublimate the distinction between art and life, will be a constant reference for Murphy. The model is without doubt modified and revised, but one can ask if its foundation is really questioned.

The first chapter in *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* addresses, among other things – and apart from Bürger – the difficult issue of ideology critique, and the so-called *Expressionismusdebatte* from the 1930s, which included participants such as Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukacs, and Ernst Bloch; a debate that had, as Murphy writes, a lasting influence on the thinking on ideology, realism, and representation during the last century. Murphy is also emphasizing, in this introductory section, two formal characteristics of the avant-garde text, as he sees it, which is its use of non-organic forms – most prominently, montage – a feature

that is, of course, emphasized by Bürger as well – and its deconstruction of the notion of subjectivity, manifested both at the level of “characterization” and on the level of “dramatic structure” in the texts under consideration.

Most important is, however, the attempt to revise Bürger’s thinking on avant-garde art’s relation to life and everyday reality. With Murphy this issue is rephrased as an epistemological and ideological critique of the patterns regulating everyday life in a bourgeois society, and he summarizes his standpoint in the following way: “Thus the avant-garde text becomes a kind of ‘oppositional discourse’ which defamiliarizes the values and conventions projected by the institution of art, and which exposes the epistemological and ideological bases beneath the construction of both the bourgeois world and the realist text” (47).

This idea of an oppositional or counter-discourse will be important in the study, and the latter observation, that the avant-garde text must be contrasted on almost all points with the realist text, is its close companion. Also the modernist text differs from the avant-garde text, especially in that the former tend to recuperate tensions or contradictions in bourgeois society, through an aesthetically elaborated form that “fits” with the new political and social conditions of modernity – i.e. it is a recuperation through aestheticism. However, these contrasts between the avant-garde, on the one hand, and modernism and realism, on the other, are not – even though pertinent and to the point on several occasions – completely convincing all the times they are being elaborated.

For example, a somewhat simplified view of realism is established now and then; especially if one is to include an author such as Flaubert in this context. In the chapter on Alfred Döblin’s innovative prose forms, and its status as a “counter-discourse”, Murphy attributes to the realist text a predilection for diegesis. And this might be true – especially if one reads Balzac. But, as Sara Danius has shown in her recent study on Flaubert (*The Prose of The World*, 2006), the traits that are here connected with the avant-garde text – the dissolution of a stable narratorial perspective, the autonomization of sensual experience as pure showing – can also be found in the Flaubertian realist text. And when Murphy develops this discussion by turning to the *Kinostil*, the cinematic writing, of Döblin, the parallel seems even stronger, since the “close up, focusing metonymically upon the synecdochic details of the action itself” (118), could just as well be a description of Flaubert’s very specific images in *Madame Bovary* or *L’Education sentimentale*, following Danius’ analysis.

There are also other instances where the description of realism seems problematic – and I would even say that the concept tends to be under-theorized,

or at least undifferentiated, which makes it an easy target in the procedure of heightening the innovative and oppositional force of the avant-garde text, as it is conceived here.

After having focused the differences between avant-garde, realism, and modernism, after having characterized the counter-discourse of the avant-garde, and after having analyzed such key expressionist writers as Döblin and Gottfried Benn in this setting, Murphy devotes three chapters to different aspects of expressionism. One chapter on “the poetics of hysteria”, which deals with the relationship between expressionist drama and the melodramatic imagination; one on Kafka, and more particularly on his best known story, “The Metamorphosis”; and, finally, one on expressionism and silent film. These chapters are, from my viewpoint at least, the greatest benefit of Murphy’s book. For me, as a critic who has not concerned himself much with expressionist drama, for example, they contain several sharp observations and illuminating moments.

Sometimes, though, I shrink back from the implications of Murphy’s model of the avant-garde. The questions-marks pop up in the margin, and settles there as bobbing red buoys. Is the emphasis on subjective expressiveness in the expressionist works he studies really consistent with the alleged deconstruction of the subject in these writings? Is it not the case that the recurrent references in expressionist poetry and essays to an essence (to *Geist*, for example) erode the idea of this text as an open-ended chain of signifiers? (Murphy addresses this question explicitly, but I am not fully convinced by his argument.) Does really the anti-realism, and the questioning of bourgeois values in expressionist stories and plays, imply a critique of the institution of art of the same stature as the Duchampian readymade or similar in(ter)ventions in the 1910s and 1920s? Is Kafka on a par with Dada (in this respect)? And even if I have to pose this questions, I find Murphy’s readings in these chapters both fascinating and intriguing.

The concluding chapter of the book summarizes the key observations made earlier – some of them have, by now, been repeated many times – and it also contains the puzzle of relating the avant-garde to postmodernism. Murphy compares the defining traits of the avant-garde, that have been disclosed so far, to the usual suspects of postmodernism – parody / pastiche (Linda Hutcheon), simulation (Baudrillard), the sublime (i.e. Lyotard’s reading of the Kantian sublime). And the verdict is – guilty. More surprisingly, there is also room for Habermas in this game. The avant-garde’s defamiliarizing aesthetic strategies

and its counter-discourse is here in sync with Habermas' view of modernity as an ongoing critical project.

Sometimes the comparisons and the attempts at tracking correspondences seem a bit labored. And I cannot avoid hesitating in front of some observations here either – for example, in a passage where a short discussion of *community* and the avant-garde comes up. Is the issue of community only relevant for a more naive avant-garde, as Murphy seems to suggest (279)? Can not community be something more than a utopian idea in this context? Can it not be considered as the consequence turned into condition for a set of aesthetic practices that came to question the idea of a solitary artist as the ultimate source of the work of art, and that instead came to introduce and explore collective ensembles and networks of different kinds?

Or – is it maybe a gap, a significant difference between expressionism and Dada that surfaces here? And is then Murphy's book maybe to be read as an elaborate attempt – and sometimes a very ingenious one at that – to stretch Bürger's model of the avant-garde just enough to fit expressionism into the scheme as well?

To some extent, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* comes out as a reminder of the pitfalls always involved in the construction of theoretical models of historical practices – and, as a reminder of the corresponding benefits of historicizing and taking the material conditions of art into account and under scrutiny. The constant threat in the book, of modernism, realism, and the avant-garde being hypostasized, is telling in this regard. On the other hand, the insistent *postmodernization* of the avant-garde, and of expressionism, and vice versa, does have an effect. Murphy might very well (have) change(d) the ways we approach the floating archive of expressionism, and he has definitely opened up some of its texts to be read anew, in productive and surprising ways.

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