

Dafydd Jones (ed.)

Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde

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The Rodopi series Avant-Garde Critical Studies not only publishes books on neo-avant-garde but also studies of diverse aspects of the avant-garde in general.¹ This new volume (no. 18), for example, is entirely dedicated to one of the most far-reaching avant-gardes in history, namely Dada. Although one cannot on the whole claim that a new book on Dada fills a gap, given that an enormous amount of research has been published over the years, nevertheless every contribution presenting a new and clear view on the subject is welcome. In this book the focus is on the contemporary (theoretical) engagement with Dada, in an effort to show the actuality of the movement itself. Given the subtitle “Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde”, however, it becomes relevant to note the problem inherent in such a formulation: a book on Dada contains critical texts on *one* avant-garde, but not on *the* avant-garde, a fact that is all the more conspicuous since David Cunningham points out in the concluding article that the expression “*the* avant-garde” is a post-war phenomenon (p. 272). However, the two excellent final articles point in many ways far beyond Dada, towards a rewritten theory of *the* avant-garde (which makes these articles alone worth the price of this volume); the preceding comment is therefore focused on the overall ambition of the volume, rather than the individual articles in themselves.

Dafydd Jones’ introduction takes as its starting point the fact that Vladimir Lenin lived close to Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, a fact that Jones allows to colour the whole introduction, which accordingly may be said to represent the view of the Other. It is clear that the criticism from Lenin about a revolution in vain is offered resistance by the revolution of laughter, which was Dada’s, but in the light of Ernst Bloch’s criticism of George Lukács’ totalitarian tendencies (discussed in Joel Freeman’s article) I am not convinced that this way of introducing Dada is successful. As we all know, it was not *the* avant-garde that won this fight, and Dada’s counterparts in Russia (a.k.a. the Soviet Union) were instead sent to the Gulag and their *œuvre* scattered all over the country. The introduction is interesting, though, especially concerning the subject of the book: Dada. The concluding remark contra Lenin before the presentation of the

¹ I have read this volume in conjunction with the two volumes on neo-avant-garde that are reviewed earlier in this issue of *Nordlit* (no. 21), and I therefore take this opportunity to make some general comments on the impression of all three books at the end of this review.

articles in the second half of the introduction, is also to the point: “revolution *without* a goal can still be revolution *with* effect” (p. 20).

The first section is dedicated to “Manifestos and Evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire”, with the first article by Cornelius Partsch on Dada performance as ritual. The ritual aspect of the Dada happening seems to be a fruitful approach, especially if one bears in mind Hugo Ball’s description of his performance of “Karawane”, where he found the “metre” for the reading when he turned to the rhythm of the Orthodox liturgy. Partsch concentrates on the noisier part of the soirées, though, which he sees as a cleaning-out of everyday life expectations:

Noise, irrevocably inscribed in power relations, temporarily cleans the slate by establishing disorder, the absence of all meaning. At the same time, it provides the perceptual and somatic conditions for previously unheard signals. (p. 53)

In this way the Dada performance becomes part of the re-enchantment and re-mystification of everyday life. John Wall and Dafydd Jones continue with an article on “The Body of the Voice”, where they interconnect language and body, their main example being Tristan Tzara’s – and Dada’s – use of the “arse” as a subversive force. Their point of departure is the problem constituted by the material body in philosophy, and how some philosophers, such as Peter Sloterdijk, have tried to think beyond this problem by ‘incorporating’ the body into their thinking. Dada performance can thus be thought of as a corporal strategy against all high values, art being one of them. Language is nothing but a control system, and therefore pure noise, and lexemes without meaning constituted Dada’s onomatopoeic of the body. As Tzara puts it: “Dada is working with all its might towards the universal installation of the idiot” (p. 81).

The second section also concerns the language of Dada, but now in a more direct way, with a primary focus on printed but fragmented word experiments. T. J. Demos begins with an article on “The Language of ‘Expatriation’”, where he discusses Marcel Duchamp’s experimentation with English in the process of learning the language:

the encounter with a different language posed an opportunity for Duchamp to dwell with pleasure in language as pure material otherness, to actively dislodge it from its normal instrumentalised or expressive functions. (p. 97)

From the word-games of Duchamp, Anna Katharina Schaffner takes the reader to Dada “Assaulting the Order of Signs”. With Jean Baudrillard she sees the language experiments of Dada as an attack on the “code” itself as the only possible way to resist and deconstruct the established order of “the bourgeois *Begriffswelt* and all that comes with it: convention, agreement and social consensus, hierarchies and power structures, the ‘Weltbild in der Sprache’ [...] and the possibility of stable meaning” (p. 119). Schaffner here extends her interesting and thorough investigation from the two previously-reviewed Rodopi books on the neo-avant-garde to an extremely interesting consideration of the possibility that the attack on language put forward by the avant-garde might be the sole available political means of changing society today. She thereby convincingly refutes all efforts to make the avant-garde a failure (as in Peter Bürger’s infamous dictum), and instead defines them as the only “theoreticians” to analyse society correctly in the twentieth century.

The next section treats “Dada Siegt!”, and Martin Ignatius Gaughan commences with an investigation of “Dada’s anti-humanist humanism”, where he associates the view of the technological modernization of Futurism with Dada. Gaughan discusses how Dada artists, in their paintings of war victims, illustrate how the prosthesis had become a common sight in post-war Germany and compares this with Ford’s “dehumanized” car production. Ford, in an infamous statement, declared that his factory would not need whole human beings, but could use people without legs or arms, etc. Curt Germundson continues with an article on Kurt Schwitters and his relation to both tradition and avant-garde, where he clearly shows how Bürger’s theory about the inorganic art of the avant-garde misses the point when it comes to Schwitters, who may be said to transform the tradition from his roots in Romanticism. Schwitters created an art form that he called autonomous; it did not detach itself from society (as Bürger thinks), but instead “was meant as a space expanding what constitutes community” (p. 177).

This section is followed by a section on “Thinkers on Stage”. This is a dubious title, considering the two interesting articles included, which both examine the changing roles of two of the most extreme avant-gardistes ever – Johannes Baader and Arthur Cravan – without much relation to the title of the section. Stephen C. Foster focuses on Ober-Dada himself and how Baader’s different roles “were designed to provide the artist with highly self-conscious, theoretical approaches in their use” (p. 189). One of the first roles was the re-creation of Christ, where the aspect of the artist as creator was taken literally. Foster seems to consider Baader as a modernist, though, since he begins his

essay with a statement about modernism and without once mentioning the notion of “avant-garde”. Dafydd Jones continues with the investigation of the boxer poet Arthur Cravan, who disappeared in the Caribbean Sea in 1918, probably having committed suicide. Jones discusses Cravan’s problematic personality (was he just somebody who could not drink alcohol without ending up in fights, the kind of person nowadays labelled a hooligan?) with the help of different theories, mainly those of Deleuze and Guattari. Despite the relevance of the article, though, I wonder whether one really ought to place such significance on the memoirs from the 1980s of his wife Mina Loy, or whether one shouldn’t rather try to demythicize Cravan – in Roland Barthes’ meaning of the word – to shed light upon his true value for an understanding of the avant-garde in general. Despite this objection concerning the trustworthiness of the source, the article in itself is very interesting in its theoretical investigation of this “hooligan” of the avant-garde.

The concluding section, with two truly outstanding articles, examines “Philosophy, Theory and the Avant-Garde”. Here there is an attempt to read the avant-garde in comparison with contemporary philosophers and thinkers who *developed together with or in parallel with the avant-garde*, such as Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, instead of thinkers like Theodor W. Adorno, for example, who understood neither jazz nor avant-garde. Both Bloch and Benjamin were closely related to the avant-garde, which makes their theories especially suitable for an understanding of the phenomenon. In a reading of Hugo Ball set against Ernst Bloch, Joel Freeman points “toward an ontology of the avant-garde” (as the subtitle read). By this means he is able to show how Dada was guided by a philosophical system that was never explicitly codified, but which may be deduced from the many analogies with the thinking of Ernst Bloch and his ontology grounded in the “not-yet-being”. This “not-yet-being” is the basis of everyday society, as well as the *concrete* Utopian urge inherent in all human beings, as a result of a common experience of lack. Bloch was particularly aware of the despotic trait in the thinking of Lukács, based as it was on Marxism. His alternative consisted of this concrete ontology as a reaction against the totalitarianism inherent in all abstract Utopias: “In a sense, concrete Utopia is understood as the ethical substrate to everyday life, the glue which provides for the possibility of community” (p. 250). This extremely interesting and enlightening text is followed by an article on Marcel Duchamp (the ghost hovering over all three of these Rodopi books, it seems) by David Cunningham, where Duchamp is lifted down from the throne upon which Peter Bürger and theoreticians of post-modernism placed him and is instead taken as an example

of the avant-garde to which he belonged. Cunningham sees the avant-garde as a “certain *repetition of the non-identical*” (p. 263). He uses this argument in an attack on all the misreadings of Duchamp’s *œuvre*, including efforts on the part of post-modernism to make him one of their proto-ancestors, where they detach him (and others) from the avant-garde and thereafter declare the “death of the avant-garde”. Cunningham also declares the importance of analysing what the avant-garde is now, since an understanding of past avant-gardes is per definition a secondary goal:

we should return our attention to the primary (and ineliminable) meaning of “avant-garde” as that of a *present* demand made by, and upon, objects or practices, in a properly historico-temporal sense. All concrete manifestations of avant-garde-ness practically inscribe a response to and a repetition of the question: what is avant-garde *now*? (pp. 273–274)

These two articles are theoretical investigations into the nature of the avant-garde, exposing misinterpretations and misreadings in clear-cut discussions of the problems of these misreadings and how to solve them. The footnotes of Cunningham’s article deserve to be framed and hung on the office wall in their own right, since he simultaneously points the way forward and further investigates problems concerning the reception of the avant-garde. I’ll say it again: buy this book – these two texts alone transform it from a (huge) economical effort to a treat. As a sort of bonus, the book ends with a complementary bibliography of literature on Dada published from 1994 to 2005, with a short introduction by Timothy Shipe, including a number of main sources from the Internet, in contrast to earlier bibliographies.

All in all, this is a book to delight in, with its variety of articles on Dada. It would have been useful to have an Index, though, to make it even easier to use the encyclopædic qualities of this anthology. I should also like future volumes to be more ‘German’ in their accuracy – and this goes for all three books from Rodopi that I have reviewed in this issue of *Nordlit* (No. 21).² In spite of these small criticisms, the series Avant-Garde Critical Studies appears to be an arena

² In its present *essayistic* state, only direct citations are supplied with references (and sometimes not even these). Other facts are stated without the slightest hint of where they have been taken from, and literature discussed in the footnotes is not included in the bibliography. References are not only required for the purposes of control, but – primarily – for other researchers to dig into, to obtain more information on a subject. Judging by these three books, at least, this is a definite shortcoming in the Rodopi series.

where the main debate on avant-garde is taking place, carried out by the most talented researchers in the field. With its two concluding articles *Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde* actually indicates a future route for an analysis of *the* avant-garde, a future that justifies the volume's subtitle. In its totality the work represents a major contribution to the understanding of Dada, as well as the implications this movement has for us today and for the art scene in general.

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