

# Avant-Garde: Its Genesis and Metamorphosis

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## Abstract:

The narratives on avant-garde have been under deep scrutiny from as early as nineteenth century and keep resurfacing and metamorphosing with changing political, social, and economic factors. These narratives are specifically organised around moments of shock, rupture, youthful revolt and speak about how experimental art functions and about the nature of its gradual change. Over the years, avant-garde has undergone various phases and manifested itself through various movements of late nineteenth and twentieth century like Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism. Whatever phase or moment it must have been in, the aim of avant-garde art in pushing the boundaries and creating something new and innovative for making the world a better place has always been its hallmark. However, the utopian avant-garde, restyled into radical iconoclastic cultural movements of the first half of the twentieth century, eventually fell into the clasp of capitalism as the latter took over the entire West. The escalating growth of consumerism that defined western capitalism included the burgeoning of its commercialised culture which produced popular culture and with it the 'historical' avant-garde slipped into the neo-avant-garde. The present paper aims to trace the journey of avant-garde from historical to neo-avant-garde.

**Keywords:** Avant-Garde, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, Utopian, Consumerism, Capitalism, Neo-Avant-Garde.

Borrowed from the French military jargon, "avant-garde", means advanced guard, or vanguard. It aims to create works that are experimental in the sphere of art, culture, and politics. European in nature, it spinned from modernism and yet was different from it in pattern. In the twentieth century, it travelled as far as America and transformed into neo or contemporary avant-garde. The term avant-garde was primarily pertinent to cutting-edge works of art and literature during the nineteenth and twentieth century. David Cottington in *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction* quite aptly defines and distinguishes between avant-garde artists and art as such:

The qualities of the arts that we call 'avant-garde'—art practice (in its broadest sense) that sought to say something new in its time, to acknowledge the implications and potential of new (including popular, mass) media, to stake a claim for aesthetic autonomy, or to challenge prevailing values—emerged . . . in the mid nineteenth century, and were bundled up in an attitude and an aspiration that we call 'avant-gardism', before there were enough aesthetically radical artists to make up that community which we call 'the avant-garde'. (4)

Cottington, quite efficiently attempts to study a related distinction between the noun 'the avant-garde' and the abstract noun 'avant-gardism', which condenses those qualities to form an attitude. To sum up, such qualities in art that sought to say something new, to acknowledge the significance and potential of emerging media, to declare aesthetic autonomy, to challenge the status quo materialized in the mid-nineteenth century and were studied under avant-gardism and created distinct groups of artists called avant-gardes.

Two seminal books that study the origin and evolution of avant-garde art vis-à-vis historical art are *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968) by Renato Poggioli and *Theory of Avant-Garde* (1984) by Peter Bürger. Both the thinkers consider newness and radical experimentation to be the dominant features of the avant-garde. However, the two differ on certain grounds. While Poggioli considers avant-garde as simply having experimental dimensions, Bürger makes the political edge in such art an imperative feature. Bürger believed that it is important for art to break away with the institution and its status of being autonomous. Poggioli placed

the rise of avant-garde art with romanticism where as for Bürger it commences with movements like, Dadaism and Surrealism and terms it as “historical avant-garde.” Whereas, Poggioli doesn’t believe that avant-garde is dead. Bürger announced its demise with the finishing of Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, hence declares it historical. Cultural historian, Matei Călinescu in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, published in 1987 notes that the journey of the term avant-garde was started as a result of the French Revolution, when it acquired undisputed political overtones. Although the first periodical which held this specific word in its title was a military one (*L'Avant-garde de l'armée des Pyrenées orientales*, a journal that appeared in 1794), it didn’t deny its revolutionary political stance. This journal was committed to the defence of Jacobin ideas and was intended to reach, beyond military circles, a broader audience to make them patriots. The French revolution of 1789 was a major event in European history that brought a rupture with the past on which the consciousness of change and modernity were founded. This event shaped the consciousness of many thinkers and artists who then imagined a society modelled on state-technocratic socialism. In arts, the earliest use of the term avant-garde is recorded in 1825 essay by a French social reformer, Benjamin Olinde Rodrigues “The Artist, the Scientist, the Industrialist.” He was the follower of Comte de Saint-Simon, French socialist theorist and one of the chief founders of Christian socialism, who propagated the idea that artists possess the power to be the leaders and shapers of the society. It is, in this context, Rodrigues, in the essay, consigns the artists, the scientists, and the industrialists to serve as the avant-garde of the society:

It is we, artists, who will serve you as an avant-garde [in the struggle toward socialism]: the power of the arts is indeed most immediate and the quickest. We possess arms of all kinds: when we want to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marbles or canvass... What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function and of marching in the van (i.e. vanguard) of all the intellectual faculties! (210)

Used in a non-military context for the first time, avant-garde, as a group of conscious artists were implored to employ their faculty of imagination rather than reason because it is the latter that had brought the society to its present impasse. Olinde Rodrigues believed that artists, through their art, hold the power to any social, political, and economic reform. By apprehending the role of artists as being way ahead of all the other agents of change, he paved a way for the artists of the future generation to break the barriers of conventional thinking and apply their genius to create new works that help the society to get better. Hence, the initial approach of avant-garde in the society was utopian. Over the centuries, avant-garde that started as a utopian project went through its metamorphosis and became a buzzword in cultural field. It eventually gave rise to a plethora of sub-movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism and so forth during the early twentieth century and, later on, got mingled with pop culture, earning itself a new terminology called neo or contemporary avant-garde.

Avant-garde first appeared in the field of fine arts, and began to be associated with radicalism on account of its up-to-datedness and its essentially critical to existing conditions; thus, it acquired political nuances. In his 1968 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Renato Poggioli reviewed the development of avant-garde and described two major phases in the development of the avant-garde. According to his study the first stage is anchored in the leftist politics of the 1840s and 1870s, where the notion of advanced guards serves to authorize the political and underground activities that helped trigger the revolutionary events of 1848 and the Paris commune. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the baton of the avant-garde is transferred from politics to aesthetics, as manifested in the new stridency and shock value possessed by the art movements as Dadaism, futurism, and surrealism. By 1968 the avant-garde had become a theoretical movement fiddling with the concerns like the extent to which and how far, would the historical avant-garde keep shifting between political and aesthetic and the possibility of its success in achieving its goals in these two fields. In simpler words, Poggioli summed up the stages of avant-garde as thus—the “political” moment of the 1840s and 1870s, the “aesthetic” moment of the 1920s and the “theoretical” moment of the 1960s.

Other than the French Revolution that fortified avant-garde, there were other factors like, decline in religious belief, and social changes following the Industrial Revolution that led to its proliferation. Due to the impingement of commercial values in every sphere of life, followed by entrenchment of capitalism, many artists felt a deep sense of alienation in a materialistic bourgeoisie society and began to reflect critically upon it. Ironically, the avant-garde claimed to be recognised in terms of autonomy: complete independence freedom from the mainstream, whether aesthetic, political or social. The cultural capital of Europe, Paris, particularly witnessed the ambivalent character of the autonomous avant-garde art as it reflected an absolute confrontation between art and society. The artists resisted against the conventions, the commodification, and the complacencies of established art forms. In 1863, Napoleon III, on receiving complaints from various disappointed artists, who were rejected by the French government and the Academy of Fine Arts sponsored Paris Salon, decided to give a respectable place to the art work that was rejected by the jury of Exhibition in another part of the Palace of Industry. Thus, *Salon des Refuses* (Exhibition of Rejected Artists) was established to offer an alternative to the standards of the Academic-run, 'establishment'-oriented official annual Salon, comprised of paintings that the jury had rejected. However, the initiative was affronted with collective resistance and ridicule from the conservative tastes of Salon's clients and the public. Thus, driven to the periphery of the art world, these artists sought alternate ways for acquiring fame and recognition by performing in informal groups. These groups comprised of artists, writers, and musicians who worked together to promote and contest new ideas and practices, about which the writers then wrote in a flourishing gamut of petite magazines. Subsequent to all these developments informal and coherent community of radical artists was formed which aimed to articulate the facets of modernity. Such works not only reflected the discomfort of the artists in the materialistic and profit driven society but also their assertion for a public role of painting, in defiance of its steady market-led privatization thus making their work political.

Peter Bürger and Andreas Huyssen observe that the historical avant-garde of the 1920s was the first movement in art history that turned against the institutionalized art and mode in which autonomy functions. In this manner, historical avant-garde as an art movement differed from the previous ones whose mode of existence was determined precisely by an account of autonomy. Andreas Huyssen in *The Great Divide* notes:

The most sustained attack on aestheticist notions of the self-sufficiency of high culture in this century resulted from the clash of the early modernist autonomy aesthetic with the revolutionary politics arising in Russia and Germany out of World War I, and with the rapidly accelerating modernization of life in the big cities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The attack goes by the name of historical avant-garde, which clearly represented a new stage in the trajectory of the modern.  
(vii)

Between 1910 and 1914, using the interpretation of art as a radical movement to challenge the status quo of artists and their established art, historical avant-garde manifested itself in various art forms. The artists thus created a network of unconventional ideas and propagating them through their art. Fauvism arose in 1905 as an art movement led by the painters, Gustave Moreau, Henri Matisse and André Derain in their expressionist works. In 1907 artists like Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso experimented with the surfaces of geometrical planes in their paintings promoting the artistic movement of Cubism. Developed in Italy in 1910, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, Gino Severini, and Giacomo Balla, Futurism was an artistic and social movement of Italy which aimed to demonstrate the calibre of the machine-age. Traces of the movement of Futurism are witnessed in the poetry distinguished by discordant medley of images and by minimalism. Till now these cardinal avant-garde movements were confined to art but with the rise of the Great War, even literature began to change. Then in 1916, an anti-establishment manifesto, Dadaism, rose in Zurich and New York in reaction to the World War I, as a cultural movement which influenced not only visual arts, but literature (mainly poetry), theatre, and graphic design too. The movement was strengthened by the works of Marcel Duchamp, Hans Arp, Max Earnest (in sculptor), Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and Tristan Tzara (in literature). The Dadaist works are anti-bourgeois that defy logic, reason and aestheticism of the modern

capitalist society and translate nonsense and irrationality of the times. Branched out of Dadaism, Surrealism is a twentieth century cultural movement developed in Paris but spread out to other parts of the West due to the First World War. The term is coined by French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire in his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. André Breton hailed the movement as a revolutionary one. In order to present the colossal damage of the World War I on the world, surrealists employed discordant juxtapositions and fantastic images to represent the unconscious of the humans as they found that realism and rationalism were the reasons behind the breakout of the Great War.

These movements were liquidated by the rise of fascism and Stalinism and its remnants were later retrospectively absorbed by modernist high culture to the extent that modern and avant-garde became synonymous terms in the critical discourse. It was the rise of Nazism that forced many artists to flee Europe as early as 1930s and nestle in New York that was already a melting pot of cultural assimilation. The modus operandi and strategies adopted by avant-garde movements during the first quarter of the twentieth century in America became the insigne of the aesthetics of modernity vis-à-vis European modernism. However America's avant-garde community restructured itself by adding new dimensions with the changing world. America's thriving control of global capitalism encouraged the growth of a network of wealthy collectors of modernist art and patrons of modernist culture. In the initial years their inclination was towards European art as it had already earned a reputation which encouraged the art collectors to see a secure financial investment. But gradually they began to sponsor home grown culture the result of which was the foundation of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929 primarily by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan where they collected modern art. It came to be identified as one of the largest and most influential museums of modern art in the world. It collectively raised the status of both European and American contemporary art, producing a lineage for distinct possibilities of experiment that would prove quite significant in years to come.

After the Second World War, the opulent classes in America which were unable to find good investment markets in wartime found newly expanded consumer market manufacturing Cadillac instead of cruisers. Such development gave rise to the market for contemporary American art which, consequently, consolidated New York avant-garde, also known as neo-avant-garde. American avant-garde proved to be an important tool for a dominant social class for whom the patronage of aesthetic innovation, bereft of any political connection, was a mark of cultural distinction. In this context, the Museum of Modern Art played a significant role. With the help of a few critics, other galleries and government policies and organisations, it promoted and supported the work of the American avant-garde artists. American avant-garde in comparison with the shackled political art of the Soviet, apparently enjoyed depoliticized aesthetic freedoms but aided America's programme of 'Cold War' propaganda. Here it is worth referring to David Cottingham who notes:

[I]ronically, it used for political purposes an Americanized modernism whose apparent autonomy, or independence from politics, was central to this very consecration. The co-option of the avant-garde, and of avant-gardism, seemed then complete. It was a co-option summarized, in a way, by the Pop Art movement in America, which in the 1960s seemed, with few exceptions, content to share consumerism's values, and to borrow its sometimes tawdry glamour, blurring or testing the boundaries between modernism and consumer culture . . . and its artists were rewarded by the ready patronage of nouveau-riche collectors who delighted in such art. (20-21)

Moreover, the avant-garde also re-emerged as a political and critical tool on account of various incidents in the second half of the twentieth century like the students protest movement of 1968, rise of modern art school, brewing anger of the women's movements and expressed itself in art that subverted its own status quo by different means.

The utopian avant-garde of Saint-Simonian sociologists restyled into radical iconoclastic cultural movements of the first half of the twentieth century and eventually fell into the clasp of capitalism as, it took

over the entire West and during twentieth century it excelled in various phases. Various critics like Perry Anderson, Matei Calinescu, and Andreas Huyssen perceive that avant-garde died in the second half of the twentieth century. Peter Bürger in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, published in 1984, pronounced avant-garde 'historical'. By doing so he wanted to state that the calibre of the avant-garde has reduced to just another historical term. The escalating growth of consumerism that defined western capitalism included the burgeoning of its commercialised culture which produced popular culture because of its technological and socio-economic factors. David Cottington outlines these factors as such:

Technologically, the new cafe-cabarets that lined the new boulevards, the new music-hall entertainments, soon to be followed by cinemas, that nightly drew huge urban crowds, were lit by modern gas, electric, lighting and were promoted colour-lithographed posters and notices in new mass circulation newspapers that were themselves funded by such advertising. Socio-economically, the new populations flocking to the cities to find work found their lives shaped by the demands of production schedules and work discipline, their leisure time regimented by the factory clock, their leisure pastimes driven by the profit motives of a developing culture industry and policed . . . by the state. (77)

Cottington's observation also reveals that because capitalism had high financial involvement in popular culture and thus the new social order which came into being in a newly urbanised society because of capitalism had to undergo the "process of re-education of its workforce to acquiescence in its highly unequal social relations, if obtaining of its bread could be left to the people, the provision of its circuses needed to be ensured" (77). In other words, capitalism strengthened consumer culture to grind its own axe. But it was done in such notorious way that it didn't seem that the commercialised popular culture was being imposed on the society and as such it (the society) took an active part in shaping the popular culture. In bourgeois society what this field of cultural production manufactured was purely aesthetic which focussed more on the form of the art and the specific institutionalization of the commerce with art.

Opposing this phase of aesthetic intensification, Futurists like Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli in their 1914 manifesto, "Weights, Measure and Prices of Artistic Genius," insist on the need for "the state to create a body of law for the purpose of guarding and regulating the sale of genius" (146), as surprisingly, even "in the field of intellectual activity fraud is still perfectly legal" (146). They attempted to dispose off all the market based valuations of artworks as aesthetics that could be amassed by the collectors. They proposed a neoteric concept of what art could be when measured in terms of value that goes beyond artworks' aesthetics. Both of them believed that the work of art is capable of communicating a social effect. They questioned the aesthetic value of art and asserted that artworks have the potential of generating social movement. By convening this neoteric basis for appraising art the authors of the manifesto were implicitly repudiating the thriving capitalist system which was the parent cause of development of the demesne of aesthetics. For this reason they rejected entire system of productive forces that reduced art to aesthetical and cultural capital. They profoundly established their stance against art's autonomy from other spheres of productive enterprise. Hence, evolves the avant-garde's primary slogan, 'art into life.'

Peter Bürger, in the essay "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*," points that in order to discard art's autonomy it was imperative to bring art into life. According to Peter Bürger, avant-garde worked on two principles: the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life as a whole:

Both principles go hand in hand, indeed they mutually condition each other. The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints which block its social effectiveness. In other words:

the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life united. (696)

Avant-garde explored the ways to revolutionize the world by dissolving the distance between art and life. However, as Peter Bürger notes, this version of avant-garde culminated with the rise and tour de force of culture industry. The avant-garde still works on the concept of “art into life” but within the confines of capitalism. Hence, he notes, that the journey of the twentieth century avant-garde is the story of decadence: from radical and revolutionary movements to simulacra, from *épater la bourgeoisie* (to shock the bourgeoisie) to a tool of capital market. The distance of the artists from the productive forces is *de rigueur* for avant-garde and it is the lessening of that distance that motivated Bürger to proclaim the death of avant-garde.

Art critic, Clement Greenberg in his Marxist influenced essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” written in 1939 had aptly argued about the rise of a phony, fake, and mechanical culture that he calls as ‘kitsch,’ a German word to describe the low, concocted form of culture. In the essay, he asserts that the only chance for avant-garde to survive kitsch culture was to assert its autonomy, i.e., to make art about art. His aesthetic views gained prominence in 1940s and 1950s when advertisement industry was flourishing. Eventually, avant-garde collapsed into commodity culture thereby producing another ‘ism’ called postmodernism for whose supporters the alliance of commerce and culture was a new prospectus for saving art from the ghetto of self-referentiality of high culture.

As the grip of postmodernism strengthened in the western world, the above mentioned faces of avant-garde culture fused into another concept of ‘creative industries’ which has been reviving national economies since then. Postmodernism blurred the boundaries of art and kitsch, opened the market for cultural creativity. It became clearer that the attempts of avant-gardist to dodge the commodification were ineffectual but also that avant-garde culture had gained a reputation that attracted the industries of popular and commodity culture. The market in New York was also affected by the changing political scenarios like the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the rise of the women’s liberation movement, the murder of two Kennedys and Martin Luther King. As a result, art forms with political connotations emerged. This period witnessed not only the moment of the collapsing of avant-garde art into commodity culture but its reassertion as an ideology—“a war-cry against a capitalist society and its culture that were perceived to be rampant, callous and complacent” (Cottington 97).

As power and social accessibility of commodity culture escalated, its capacity to shape the art and the role and character of the art of avant-garde also grew. For the avant-garde artists this was a major concern as they didn’t want their art forms to disintegrate into popular culture. Avant-garde art sought to create a space between high culture of the dominant classes and low culture of the dominated ones. Gradually, avant-garde artists “raided popular idioms and conventions, and incorporated them into their experimental works, as a means of harnessing that vitality without simply capitulating to it” (Cottington 81). Many art forms gained momentum in opposition to the marketization of contemporary art and its coming under the sovereignty of private museums. Minimalist artists like Robert Morris, Donal Judd, ‘land art’ of Richard Long and Robert Smithson, conceptual art of Sol Lewitt, institutional critique of Hans Haacke and a thousand women artists such as Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, showed enough capability for bringing commotion in the smooth running of capitalist culture.

In a seminal essay, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts” (1983) art historian Thomas Crow suggests that avant-garde should be seen as a ‘resistant subculture’ which he defined as a class of “certain members which attempts to resolve difficult and contradictory experience common to their class but felt more acutely by the subculture recruits” (20). Borrowing from the low-brow culture for the creation of avant-garde art was corresponding to symbolic resistance—a message from the margins not only in the inclusion of its intruder material, but in the manner of its use in their work as well.

Against this notion, French cultural sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) thought that borrowing of motifs from popular culture, avant-garde sought to gain power and status within mainstream society and not against it. He observed:

Intellectuals and artists have a special predilection for the most risky but also most profitable strategies of distinction, those which consist in asserting the power, which is peculiarly theirs, to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, but in another mode, by other classes or class fractions (e.g., kitsch). (282)

These artists belong to the dominated class of the society and borrowing motifs from the very class which detests those qualities and experience is their way to assert themselves as artists to raise their social status. Whether gaining power and status within mainstream society or against it, in the second half of the twentieth century, avant-garde was perpetually shifting between avant-garde culture and commodity culture. Avant-garde culture was torn between “a retreat behind the stockade of ‘high’ art and a capitulation to the seductions, and the dynamism, of a ‘low’ commodity culture that now had the cultural upper hand” (Cottingham 90). Avant-garde, now, has reduced to a kind of research and development tool of cultural industry and thus stops being oppositional.

