

## **“L’art, expression de la Société, est précurseur et révélateur”. The Heterogeneity of the Notion of “Avant-Garde”**

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In this article, I shall try to shed some new light upon the notion of avant-garde, with the purpose of showing its different national use and heterogeneity of meaning. This pluralism is overlooked today because of the hegemony of English in academic studies, which leads one to believe that a consensus exists in the use of the term “avant-garde”, since so many academics write their articles and books in this language. This article, therefore, is an attempt to recuperate the notion of “avant-garde” to stringent use and gain a deeper insight into the aesthetic movements of modernity and late modernity. I hope to show that, despite the fact that many writers believe that there exists only one recognition of the notion of “avant-garde”, the understanding of the Anglo-American “centre” is actually as peripheral as that of other countries – which are normally regarded as peripheries. Instead of retaining the logocentric dichotomy of centre-periphery, an understanding of the heterogeneity forces us to realize that this dichotomy is of no value, since all understandings are equally peripheral when it comes to the notion of “avant-garde” in an international perspective.

L'art, expression de la Société, exprime, dans son essor le plus élevé, les tendances sociales les plus avancées; il est précurseur et révélateur. Or, pour savoir si l'art remplit dignement son rôle d'initiateur, si l'artiste est bien à l'avant-garde, il est nécessaire de savoir où va l'Humanité, quelle est la destinée de l'Espèce. [---] à côté de l'hymne au bonheur, le chant douloureux et désespéré. [...] Étalez d'un pinceau brutal toutes les laideurs, toutes les tortures qui sont au fond de notre société.<sup>1</sup>

Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant, 1845

Metaphors grow old, turn into dead metaphors, and finally become clichés. This succession seems to be inevitable – but on the other hand, poets have the power to return old clichés into words with a precise meaning. Accordingly, academic writers, too, need to carry out a similar operation with notions that are worn out by frequent use in everyday language. One metaphor that has been hollowed out in such a way, through lax use by journalists and literary historians, is the concept of “avant-garde”. In this article, I shall try to shed some new light upon this notion, with the purpose of showing its different national use and heterogeneity of meaning. This pluralism is overlooked today because of the hegemony of English in academic studies, which leads one to believe that a consensus exists in the use of the term “avant-garde”, since so many academics write their articles and books in this language. The current analysis is directed towards theoreticians’ ways of dealing with the notion in question, by which I mean everybody who writes or thinks about the notion of “avant-garde”. This article is an attempt to recuperate the term to stringent use and gain a deeper insight into the aesthetic movements of modernity and late modernity.<sup>2</sup> I hope to show that, despite the fact that many writers believe that there exists only one recognition of the notion of “avant-garde”, the understanding of the Anglo-American “centre” is actually as peripheral as that of other countries – which are normally regarded as peripheries.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of “avant-garde” was adopted from military use in the 1820s by a group of Utopians closely connected to Saint-Simon.<sup>4</sup> The metaphor was evidently coined in France

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- 1 Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant. *La Mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes*, Paris: Aux bureaux de la Phalange, 1845, pp. 4, 24. My article originated as a paper presented at the conference: *Rethinking the Avant-Garde: Between Politics and Aesthetics*, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, USA, 14–15 April 2000; it has also been published in an earlier version: Per Bäckström, “Avant-Garde, Vanguard or 'Avant-Garde'. What We Talk About When We Talk About Avant-Garde”, in *Representing. Gender, Ethnicity and Nation in Word and Image*, Karin Granqvist & Ulrike Spring (ed.), Tromsø: Kvinnforsk Occasional Papers, 2001. This first article was but a preliminary inquiry, and I have since felt that I did not entirely grasp the entire breadth of the problem. I have now realized that the problem may lie in the fact that English today is the *lingua franca* in a globalized world, thereby covering up the heterogeneity of understanding of the notion of “avant-garde” that exists. The problem is that the “great divide” between a Germanic and a Romance understanding *appears* to be bridged by the (Anglo-)American use of the term.
  - 2 I shall use the notion of “late modernity”, instead of the inappropriate notion of “post-modernity” (one cannot claim to be post something without arguing in a *circulus vitiosus*), in accordance with Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991 [1984], p. 3. For an elaboration of these notions, see the introduction to my doctoral thesis: Per Bäckström. *Aska, Tomhet & Eld. Outsiderproblematiken hos Bruno K. Öijer*, Lund: Ellerström, 2003.
  - 3 There are of course researchers who reflect critically on the notion of “avant-garde” and who do not take its content for granted, one of them being: Paul Mann. *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
  - 4 According to Matei Calinescu, it was Saint-Simon who formulated the premises for art to be avant-garde in 1820, but it was others around him who adopted the military term as a metaphor in 1825, Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987, pp. 101–02. The actual time is debated, but since Saint-Simon had a central

and it was there that it became popular during the nineteenth century. From here, the notion spread into the art world all over Europe – at different moments in history, as we shall see. The means and strategies of the avant-garde movements during the first quarter of the twentieth century have become some of the most significant emblems of the aesthetics of modernity. During the 1960s, a broad attempt was made to define the notion of “avant-garde” *sensu stricto*, as a reaction to the post-war avant-gardes that started up during the 1950s, but during the last decades of the twentieth century the term as such became so broad and diffuse that it was evident it could not signify anything, and had instead been hollowed out into an empty signifier by extensive everyday use.<sup>5</sup> Since at least the middle of the 1990s, though, a debate on the issue of avant-garde has gradually developed again, a fact that makes it even more urgent to try to disentangle the varying meanings and uses of the concept as such.<sup>6</sup>

In this article I shall take as my point of departure the different meanings attached to the notion in a linguistic north–south perspective and show how it is possible to divide this understanding according to two main lines and four or five words.<sup>7</sup> This roughly corresponds to the differences between Germanic and Romance-speaking countries, even though the problem is further complicated by the fact that Anglo-Americans have yet another understanding of the notions of “modernism” and “avant-garde”. I should have preferred to employ the term “Germanic” in the linguistic sense, i.e. to include the Anglo-American language regions. However, their use of these notions is a tricky one, since – even though Anglo-Saxon belongs linguistically to the Germanic group of languages – American scholars’ understanding, especially, of “modernism” and “avant-garde” does not coincide with the current meaning of these terms among writers in other Germanic languages, a fact that I shall return to in what follows.<sup>8</sup>

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role in the development, this period seems sufficiently probable, since I have no urge to establish the “exact” date of the transfer.

- 5 A quick search for the term “avant-garde” in Google will make this perfectly clear.
- 6 As may be seen from the fact that the series *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*, published by Rodopi, was started as early as 1987.
- 7 This analysis will necessarily lead to certain generalizations and, although one should not generalize, this is necessary in order to grasp the complexity of the problem, which is caused by the heterogeneity of understanding that is not at all reflected in the debate. The problem with generalization is that it is always possible to find exceptions but, although this is not a proper objection to my argument, which is based on principal (approximate) *similarities* in understanding, the exceptions are very interesting in themselves. The Germans, for example, prefer to use the notion of “Die Moderne”, instead of “modernism”. Hubert van den Berg has pointed out to me that the use of “modernism” and “avant-garde” in Dutch and Flemish is not in accordance with the Germanic use. It is of course also urgently necessary to explore the different meanings in e.g. an East-West perspective as well, but – since I do not speak the Slavic languages, amongst others – this has to be left to other researchers. My colleague Agata Jakubowska at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan has, however, advised me that “avant-garde” and “modernism” are used in Poland in the same way as in Germanic countries, but with an inclination to use avant-garde as the preferred term: “end of 60s and 70s, ‘modernism’ is beginning to be used to describe something that is not avant-garde enough”, e-mail 13 January 2007. Both variations are worth a treatise in themselves, together with other, similar exceptions, but such an analysis of the use of the notions of modernism and avant-garde mainly belongs in a local plane, an investigation that I hope will be carried out on a national basis, where this has not yet occurred.
- 8 As may be seen from two volumes on neo-avant-garde published by Rodopi, reviewed by me in *Nordlit* no. 21 2007 <[Hhttp://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/index.html](http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/index.html)>, the Anglo-Saxon theoreticians seem to entertain a more European view of these notions, even though the understanding is made problematic by the American impact in general. I shall therefore refer to an American understanding in comparison to the Germanic and Romance. *Avant-Garde/ Neo-Avant-Garde*, Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 17, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005; *Neo-Avant-Garde*, David Hopkins (ed.), *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 20, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006. In these books, though, there is no problematization at all of the different understandings between, for example, the Romance-speaking countries and the Germanic, where Renato Poggioli, for example, is placed on a par with other theoreticians with a less

In order to exemplify this problem I should like to cite two respected literary critics, one from Italy and one from the US, talking about the relationship between avant-garde and kitsch or mass culture. The first theoretician is Umberto Eco who, in his book *The Open Work* (1989), originally published in Italian in 1962 as *Opera aperta*, comments that:

The definition of Kitsch as a communication aiming at the production of an immediate effect has certainly helped to identify it with mass culture, and to set it in dialectic opposition to the “high” culture proposed by the avant-garde.<sup>9</sup>

Compare this with what Andreas Huyssen says in his 1986 book *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*:

My point of departure, however, is that despite its ultimate and perhaps inevitable failure, the historical avant-garde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low.<sup>10</sup>

Umberto Eco and Andreas Huyssen seemingly represent contrary positions, and one might therefore ask: who is mistaken? The answer, though, cannot be a straightforward one, since they are both right in their different contexts. The underlying reason for Eco and Huyssen’s inconsistency is actually to be found in their different national and linguistic backgrounds: Eco is Italian and Huyssen works in America – though he is German of origin – and a wide ocean divides their use of the word “avant-garde”.

### The concept of avant-garde before 1960

To put my main argument simply: the Romance-speaking theoretician’s use of the term “avant-garde” is quite different from the Germanic-speaking critic’s not-so-inclusive understanding of the same term. In my opinion, the translation of the Umberto Eco quotation is misleading, since Eco is not talking about avant-garde in the strict Germanic sense at all, but of “avanguardia”, which is a different notion. He is thereby referring to a phenomenon that may best be translated as the – highly disputed – notion of “high modernism”, a term sometimes used when talking about the aesthetic movements of the 1920s in the (Anglo-) American languages, including a core of modernist and avant-garde artists.<sup>11</sup> I shall therefore

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inclusive notion of “avant-garde” than that of Peter Bürger. The translation of Poggioli’s *Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia* seems to have functioned as an eye-opener for the Anglo-Americans, something that is made evident by the fact that it was translated as “*The theory of the avant-garde*”, not just “*Teoria*” as in the original. Renato Poggioli. *Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1962; Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* [Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia], Gerald Fitzgerald (transl.), Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1968 [1962].

9 Umberto Eco. *The Open Work*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 185. The chapter in *The Open Work* from which this citation is taken comes from another book, though, and the translator has not respected the italics of the original: “Se si evidenzia la definizione del Kitsch, come *comunicazione che tende alla provocazione dell’effetto*, si comprende allora come sia venuto spontaneo identificare Kitsch e cultura di massa: vedendo il rapporto tra cultura “superiore” e cultura di massa come una dialettica tra avanguardia e Kitsch”, Umberto Eco. *Apocalittici e integrati*, Milano: Tascabili Bompiani, 1988, p. 72.

10 Andreas Huyssen. *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. viii.

11 Fredric Jameson, to whom I shall return, uses the notion of “high modernism” in the sense I have indicated: “This very commitment to the experimental and the new, however, determine an aesthetic that is far more closely related to the traditional ideologies of high modernism proper than to current postmodernisms, and is indeed – paradoxically enough – very closely related to the conception of the revolutionary nature of high modernism that Habermas faithfully inherited from the Frankfurt School”, Fredric Jameson, “Foreword”, in

use this term, for lack of a better notion, to capture the similarity between the Romance and (Anglo-)American understanding of the aesthetic movements in modernity. An understanding of what the core of avant-garde or (high) modernism is does seem to exist (Dada, Russian futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism, etc.), but there is a big difference between the inclusiveness of the term as used by different nations.

In Romance-speaking countries there seems to be an awareness of the heterogeneity of the avant-garde movements: there is not really anything like “the avant-garde” in the singular, but there are several disparate movements that share a collective feeling or idea about art – with Ludwig Wittgenstein building on family likeness rather than identity.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, no second term exists that corresponds to the Anglo-American notion of “modernism”.<sup>13</sup> Romance speakers normally prefer to use one and the same term, i.e. “avant-garde” in the different national variations, to refer to the dynamic art movements of the twentieth century.

This is a fact made clear when looking at instances of how the concept is employed in Romance languages. The Spanish critic Guillermo de Torre discusses James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and André Gide using the concept of “vanguardia” in his early book (1925) on the subject, *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia*.<sup>14</sup> In *L'avanguardia e la poetica del realismo*, the Italian critic Paolo Chiarini discusses both Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann.<sup>15</sup> And the best-known Romance language treatise on the avant-garde, the Italian critic Renato Poggioli's *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*, translated as *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, includes the following:

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Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, p. xvi. “Modernism” is a too wide a term by comparison with the Romance word “avanguardia”, which makes it necessary to create this delimitation, even though the notion of “high modernism” is not used by all American theoreticians, and the Anglo-Saxon speaking subjects may even refute the notion totally. There is an Anglo-American tendency, though, to use “modernism” to represent a larger notion and include the avant-garde, which I personally see as a contradiction in terms. In the best treaty written on modernism that I know of, Ástráður Eysteinnsson's *The Concept of Modernism* 1990, one reads, for example: “In that case, ‘modernism’ is necessarily the broader term, while the concept of the ‘avant-garde’ has proven to enjoy a good deal of ‘free-play’ within the overall reach of modernism. At the same time, nothing that is modernist can escape the touch of the avant-garde”, Ástráður Eysteinnsson. *The Concept of Modernism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 177.

12 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in *Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1960.

13 Even though one finds that Rubén Darío used the word “modernismo” during the 1890s, it had a different meaning and later it was not possible to continue to use this notion, since the Church appropriated the term as a description of its own development. For a discussion on Spanish “modernismo”, see e.g. Peter Luthersson. *Modernism och individualitet. En studie i den litterära modernismens kvalitativa egenart*, Stockholm/Lund: Symposion, 1986, pp. 31–32, who is one of the few to discuss this fact. In Brazil there was an avant-garde movement during the 1920s that called itself “modernismo” in Portuguese, against which the avant-gardes of the sixties reacted as their avant-garde tradition. Claus Clüver makes it clear that this notion is not an adequate equivalent of the Anglo-American notion of “modernism”, but rather the Romance, even Germanic, understanding of “avant-garde”, see e.g. Claus Clüver, “The ‘Ruptura’ Proclaimed by Brazil's Self-Styled ‘Vanguardas’ of the Fifties”, in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, David Hopkins (ed.), *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 20, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006; Claus Clüver, “Brasilien”, in *Metzler Lexikon Avantgarde*, Hubert van den Berg & Walter Fähnders (ed.), Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag (forthcoming), 2007.

14 Guillermo de Torre. *Historia de las literaturas de vanguardia* [Literaturas europeas de vanguardia], Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1971 [1925], pp. 30, 42.

15 Paolo Chiarini. *L'avanguardia e la poetica del realismo*, Bari: Laterza, 1961, pp. 10–11.

About this we must admit, without further ado, that the avant-garde as much as any other art current, even perhaps more extremely and intensely, is characterized not only by its own modernity but also by the particular and inferior type of modernism which is opposed to it.<sup>16</sup>

This last quotation, with its rather confusing use of the term of “modernism”, makes it apparent that the Romance-speaking subjects do not recognize this notion in the Anglo-American sense of the word. Rather, the preference is for the native varieties of the concept, “vanguardia”, “vanguardia”, “avanguardia” or “avant-garde”, well-established terms that contain a theoretical significance in their respective linguistic contexts. Worse, the above citation of Poggioli in translation into English is based on a misunderstanding, since the original reads:

Ed a questo proposito va senz'altro ammesso che alla pari d'ogni altra corrente artistica, anzi forse in modo anche più estremo ed intenso, l'avanguardia si contrassegna non solo dalla modernità che le distingue, ma anche dal tipo particolare e deteriore di *modernismo* che vi si oppone o vi corrisponde.<sup>17</sup>

Poggioli is not talking about the Anglo-American notion of “modernism” at all: he is referring to the aesthetic movement of “modernismo” in the Romance countries, which is something completely different. Matei Calinescu, for another, points out the same difference between “modernismo” and “vanguardia” as Poggioli: “A similar process took place in Spain, but there the notion of ‘vanguardia’ was, from the very beginning, opposed to that of ‘modernismo’”.<sup>18</sup>

The term “avant-garde” continued to be used in Romance countries in the same way, even after the 1960s. Octavio Paz discusses the avant-garde, including James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, in his book *Children of the Mire. Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, published in 1974, well after the debate about this concept had started in Germanic-speaking countries.<sup>19</sup> The Anglo-Americans, on the other hand, do not seem to recognize Romance speakers’ use of the word “avant-garde”, since for example Eco’s term *avanguardia* is mistakenly translated as “avant-garde”, and not more correctly – as I shall insist – as “high modernism”.

A rather recent example of the inconsistency in the use of this term is found in the German critic Jochen Schulte-Sasse’s foreword to the translation of Peter Bürger’s *Theorie der Avant-garde*,<sup>20</sup> published in English in 1984, where Schulte-Sasse critically discusses Renato Poggioli’s contribution to the analysis of the term avant-garde:

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16 Poggioli 1968, pp. 216–17.

17 Poggioli 1962, p. 241, my italics.

18 Calinescu 1987, p. 118. This explanation works for Italy as well, of course.

19 Octavio Paz. *Children of the Mire. Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde* [Los hijos del limo], Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974 [1974].

20 Peter Bürger. *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.

Poggioli's criteria are both historically and theoretically too unspecific; his arguments cannot accomplish what must be the primary task of a "theory of the avant-garde": to characterize with theoretical accuracy the historical uniqueness of the avant-garde of the 1920s (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, the left avant-garde in Russia and Germany).<sup>21</sup>

I can only agree that Poggioli is "too unspecific", and the reason for this is that his aim is *not* to "characterize [...] the historical uniqueness of the avant-garde" in the Germanic sense. Poggioli's main task is to characterize the dominant strategies of "avanguardia", of which the Anglo-American equivalent is the notion of "high modernism". Why else would he be discussing Joyce, Eliot, Yeats and others, under the heading of "avanguardia", just as Romance-speaking theoreticians in general do?<sup>22</sup> In the foreword by Schulte-Sasse there is also a comment that sheds light on the difference between the Germanic use of the notions of "modernism" and "avant-garde", on the one hand, versus the Romance-speaking countries' use of "avant-garde", "avanguardia", "vanguardia" and "vanguardia" and the Anglo-American use of "modernism" on the other hand, when he writes about Poggioli:

His book is vulnerable, owing to his inability to determine the qualitative (and not just the quantitative) difference between romanticism and modernism. Yet, in his tendency to equate modernism and the avant-garde – and subsume both under the label 'modernism' – Poggioli typifies the Anglo-American tradition.<sup>23</sup>

Schulte-Sasse apparently judges Poggioli according to the norms of a less inclusive Germanic tradition, and is thus not able to realize that Poggioli is actually a typical representative of the Romance and not the Anglo-American tradition, even though Schulte-Sasse, like most Germanic speakers, has obviously read Poggioli in the Anglo-American translation. The confusion is caused by the fact that the Romance meaning of "avant-garde", in the way that Poggioli and other Romance theoreticians employ it, is more or less synonymous with the Anglo-American notion of "high modernism". Schulte-Sasse, however, is mistaken when he associates Poggioli with an Anglo-American tradition, since – as we have seen – for Poggioli, modernism is *not* the hegemonic term, since he does not refer to the Anglo-American notion of "modernism" at all, but instead to the inferior *Other* in the Romance context: *modernismo*. What Schulte-Sasse makes clear, though, is the apparent *contradiction in terms* that arises when the Anglo-Americans equate the two notions of "modernism" and "avant-garde", thereafter placing one of them – "modernism" – hegemonically above the other.

### The desire for definition

To the best of my knowledge, few scholars have as yet paid attention to the vast difference between the Romance and Germanic uses of the term avant-garde, and I believe that the reason for this is the debate about "the death of the avant-garde" from the 1950s onwards, a debate that has blurred the fact that the definition of the term has not been parallel on both sides of the language 'barrier'. The debate started as a reaction (on the part of the theoreticians) to the passivity of the avant-gardist movements immediately after the Second World War. This inactivity had already set in during the decades before the war, with a witch-hunt

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21 Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword. Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde", in *Peter Bürger. Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Theory and history of literature 4, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. x.

22 Poggioli 1968, p. 224.

23 Schulte-Sasse 1984, p. xiv.

against avant-garde movements in Germany and the Soviet Union from the late 1920s until at least 1945 and 1953, respectively.

During the 1960s, a stream of texts appeared that speculated about the “failure” of the avant-garde: Leslie Fiedler declares “The Death of Avant-Garde Literature”; Hans Magnus Enzenberger speaks of “Die Aporien der Avantgarde”; James S. Ackerman talks about “The Demise of the Avant-Garde”; Robert Hughes writes about “The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde”, to mention just a few.<sup>24</sup> Of course, all these critics had a very reasonable point in perceiving the avant-garde as a fiasco, when one considers the “failure” of “the historical avant-garde” in trying to forge coalitions with the revolutionary parties of the 1920s. These coalitions mainly turned out to be the impetus for the witch-hunt just mentioned, rather than a successful merger of art and life.

However, the theoreticians of the 1960s take their point of departure not only in the non-existence of avant-gardes immediately after the war: they also, explicitly or implicitly, respond to the re-appearance of avant-gardes during the 1950s and 1960s. These movements started as a reaction on the part of a new generation of writers and artists against the above-mentioned lack of continuance of an avant-garde tradition, and in the context of a similar socio-political situation to that of the 1910s and 1920s. Critics seem to have felt the urge to declare these “neo-avant-garde” artists bankrupt almost before they got the chance to act out their strategies in the streets and in galleries. In their attacks on the post-war avant-gardes the theoreticians searched for stable ground as a foundation for their analysis of the “decline” of the avant-gardes. This necessitated a concrete definition of what “avant-garde” as a concept was taken to represent.

The 1960s is therefore characterized not only by attacks on neo-avant-gardes, but also by the emergence of books and articles trying to close in on what “the historical avant-garde” really was. At a distance of forty years and a world war, the avant-garde movements of the 1920s stood out as something that could not be accurately designated solely by the Anglo-American term “modernism”. Thus, Germanic-speaking nations imported the notion of avant-garde from the Romance languages, a word that had not really been used in Germany before the 1960s.<sup>25</sup>

If one considers Anglo-American as part of the Germanic language area, the notion of “avant-garde” had, similarly, seldom been used here, with the main exception of the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who investigated a phenomenon he called avant-garde in the article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939).<sup>26</sup> By the term avant-garde he means a movement in opposition to kitsch, but if one considers the approach of different movements to “the great divide” between high and low art, in Andreas Huyssen’s sense, as a criterion for the difference between avant-garde and modernism, Greenberg is actually talking about “high modernism” in a traditional American fashion.<sup>27</sup> This is made absolutely clear by the earlier cita-

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24 Leslie A. Fiedler, “The Death of Avant-Garde Literature”, in *The collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. II, New York: Stein and Day, 1971, originally published in *New York Herald Tribune Magazine*, May 17, 1964; Hans Magnus Enzenberger, “Die Aporien der Avantgarde”, in *Einzelheiten*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962; James S. Ackerman, “The Demise of the Avant-Garde. Notes on the Sociology of Recent American Art”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1969: 2; Robert Hughes, “The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde”, in *Idea Art. A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock (ed.), New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973.

25 As Ulrich Weisstein has convincingly argued: Ulrich Weisstein, “Le Terme et le concept d’avant-garde en Allemagne”, *Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles* 1975.

26 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, in *Art and Culture. Critical Essays*, Boston, 1961 [1939].

27 “Greenberg uses the two terms [avant-garde and modernism] more or less interchangeably”, David Cunningham, “Making an Example of Duchamp. History, Theory, and the Question of the Avant-Garde”, in *Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde*, Dafydd Jones (ed.), *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 18, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 272. “Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset



tion from Umberto Eco, who, in turn, makes a critique of Clement Greenberg's article. This means that the similarities between the American understanding of "avant-garde" (or, as I call it, high modernism) and the Italian understanding of "avanguardia" are so closely related that they understand each other perfectly, even though Greenberg goes against American common use at that time and talks about avant-garde instead of (high) modernism.

The lack of a significant term for the "revolutionary" art movements of the 1960s therefore provided the impetus that led Germanic-speaking theoreticians to import the metaphor of "avant-garde" from Romance-speaking countries and in general attribute to it a less inclusive sense.<sup>28</sup> The concept of "modernism" was too wide to be useful in an explanation of the phenomenon, and using limitations such as "high modernism", signifying the art movements of the 1920s, was no better an option. It therefore proved necessary to coin a new term in order to make it possible to distinguish between modernism as a purely aesthetic movement and avant-garde as both an aesthetic and a political movement, and by this the Germanic understanding singles out the core of the understanding of avant-garde – Dada, Italian and Russian Futurism, Surrealism, Expressionism, etc., by not including modernists such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, who are included in the Romance and American understanding.

In my opinion, the use of the Anglo-American notion of "modernism" before the 1960s does not entirely coincide with the Romance-speaking use of the term "avant-garde". Anglo-American theoreticians approached the phenomenon from a modernistic point of view, while Romance-speaking subjects took an approach that was closer to the historical avant-garde movements of the 1920s. The reason for these differing approaches seems to be the role that avant-gardes played in the aesthetics of the early twentieth century. In Romance-speaking countries, the avant-garde movements as such were more in the forefront of artistic development as a whole, whilst in Germanic countries – outside of the German-speaking countries – several different modernistic currents took the lead, making a deep impact on, for example, Anglo-American understanding of the notion of "modernism".<sup>29</sup>

This, I would say, is the reason for the adoption of a second concept in German-speaking countries characterizing the art movements of the 20th century. There was no actual need to import a second term to Romance-speaking countries, since they could manage with – as Jochen Schulte-Sasse puts it – their "unspecific" notion that, moreover, could be applied with the prefix "neo" to different phenomena occurring during the second half of the century.

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emphasized time and again that it was their mission to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of urbanization, massification, technological modernization, in short, of modern mass culture. The avant-garde of the first three decades of this century, however, attempted to subvert art's autonomy, its artificial separation from life, and its institutionalization as 'high art' which was perceived to feed right into the legitimation needs of the 19th-century forms of bourgeois society", Huyssen 1986, p. 27. Huyssen clearly perceives the similarity between the Spanish "vanguardia" and the Anglo-American notion of "modernism", since he places the *vanguardia* philosopher Gasset in the category of "modernism", even though Huyssen does not seem to recognize the hegemonic inclusiveness of the latter term.

28 By "revolutionary" I do not mean political art currents in general, but movements – such as "the historical avant-garde" – that are both politically and aesthetically inclined, in a way that foregrounds the aesthetic practice.

29 The importance of, for example, the Dada movements in Germany and Geneva on the avant-garde is undisputed. Whether Expressionism belongs to the avant-garde or not is highly debated, but the movement is usually included in theoretical approaches to the avant-garde. For an extensive and highly interesting discussion on Expressionism, see Richard Murphy. *Theorizing the Avant-Garde. Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. In Great Britain there was almost no avant-garde, with the exception of Vortex, which I would say was a typically continental phenomenon, since Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot were all directly influenced by the French, and especially the Italian, avant-gardes, and not by any Anglo-Saxon art movements, which instead became the direct subject of attacks by Vortex.

The German critic Peter Bürger is the main figure in the aforementioned “wild bunch” of theoreticians who declared the impossibility of a neo-avant-garde.<sup>30</sup> He is also the one who has taken upon himself the task of analyzing the avant-garde proper in his book *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974) (*Theory of the Avant-garde* 1984),<sup>31</sup> and thanks to him we now have a better understanding of what he calls “the historical avant-garde”, i.e. the “revolutionary” art movements in the short period stretching from about 1905 to 1925, even though one should extend the period to roughly 1930.<sup>32</sup> The goal of the historical avant-garde was to reintegrate art into life, but not in the “modernist” way, which I would describe as an attempt to elevate life to the level of art (an aestheticization of life). The ambition was rather the opposite: to include art as a natural component of life (a richer life), since art appeared to be autonomous and had no contact with everyday life.<sup>33</sup> For that purpose, the avant-garde had to attack “art as institution”, and with it the concept of “the work of art”.<sup>34</sup>

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30 He is therefore the main target in the earlier-mentioned two books on the neo-avant-garde: *Neo-Avant-Garde 2006; Avant-Garde/ Neo-Avant-Garde 2005*.

31 Bürger 1974; Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [Theorie der Avantgarde], Michael Shaw (transl.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1974].

32 Peter Bürger’s lack of definition of what he means by the notion of “avant-garde” is another significant problem in his book. This is something he touches upon very roughly in an easily-overlooked footnote, and that is all: “The concept of the historical avant-garde movements used here applies primarily to Dadaism and early Surrealism but also and equally to the Russian avant-garde after the October revolution. Partly significant differences between them notwithstanding, a common feature of all these movements is that they do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of earlier art but reject that art in its entirety, thus bringing about a radical break with tradition. In their most extreme manifestations, their primary target is art as an institution such as it has developed in bourgeois society. With certain limitations that would have to be determined through concrete analyses, this is also true of Italian Futurism and German Expressionism. / Although cubism does not pursue the same intent, it called into question the system of representation with its linear perspective that had prevailed since the Renaissance. For this reason, it is part of the historic avant-garde movements, although it does not share their basic tendency (sublation of art in the praxis of life)” Bürger 1984, p. 109, note 4. I conclude from this that his statement refers to the period 1905–1925. This is a typical example of the criticism I expressed in the beginning of this article: theoreticians very seldom define what they are talking about when they refer to the avant-garde (or modernism). Besides, singling out the Russian avant-gardes before the October Revolution without any justification is absolutely astonishing.

33 This is my interpretation of Bürger’s famous statement, a statement that has received a good deal of critique. His division between art and life has been criticized from a Marxist perspective, but in general very little has been done to elaborate on the notions *per se*. (Hal Foster does raise this question, though, see e.g. Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996, pp. 15–17). What exactly is Bürger implying with his notions, and – more importantly – what does avant-garde mean here? My own assumption is that art – of course – is not Art, i.e. art as institution, but the free creativity put into play as the sole denominator for art (this, of course, creates the presumed paradox that avant-garde makes art while destroying art outrageous, since art is not identical to Art, i.e. making art does not prevent one from attacking the institution of art). The same is true in life: what exactly does the avant-garde mean in life? Well, I do not completely agree with Ben Highmore that the avant-garde means simply everyday life, since I perceive the statements of the avant-garde as implying – as I explain above – a creative life (a lot of their criticism is with regard to the lethargic state of everyday life, a life *not* worthy of being stood up for). Ben Highmore. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory. An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2002. In this case, merging art and life means living a creative life in every aspect of the word: a richer life. “Estrangement is a mode of aesthetic distancing from the common, the everyday; that which is expected and reproduced through habit, social dictate and conceptual hierarchy”, Joel Freeman, “Ernst Bloch and Hugo Ball. Toward an Ontology of the Avant-Garde”, in *Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde*, Dafydd Jones (ed.), Avant-Garde Critical Studies 18, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 241.

34 For a discussion on the relationship between neo-avant-garde and the notion of art, see e.g. Sven-Olov Wallenstein, “Transformative Technologies: Notes Towards a Redefinition of the Avant-Garde”, *Cabinet* 2001: 2, pp. 25–28.

The problem with Bürger's analysis is not so much his reflection on the historicity of the epoch of "the historical avant-garde" as his transposition of his results as valid for a period that comes after as well, a strategy that is not really possible on the methodological premises that he himself has set up. Basically, a theory based on an epoch that has passed cannot be transferred in order to explain another, chronologically later period. The following, often quoted, statement by Bürger is therefore quite remarkable:

The concept 'historic avant-garde movements' distinguishes these from all those neo-avant-gardiste attempts that are characteristic for Western Europe and the United States during the fifties and sixties. Although the neo-avant-gardes proclaim the same goals as the representatives of the historic avant-garde movements to some extent, the demand that art be reintegrated in the praxis of life within the existing society can no longer be seriously made after the failure of avant-gardiste intentions. If an artist sends a stove pipe to an exhibit today, he will never attain the intensity of protest of Duchamp's Ready-Mades. On the contrary, whereas Duchamp's Urinoir is meant to destroy art as an institution (including its specific organizational forms such as museums and exhibits), the finder of the stove pipe asks that his 'work' be accepted by the museum. But this means that the avant-gardiste protest has turned into its opposite.<sup>35</sup>

Besides the fact that Peter Bürger's argument is inconsistent, since Duchamp himself, like the fictive neo-avant-gardiste, made the effort to have his work accepted at an exhibition, Bürger does not – in 1974 – observe that the notion of art has changed, or rather "imploded", after the massive attack on art as institution put forward by the historical avant-gardes and their "inheritors" in the 1960s. The changed socio-political context, as well as a cultural scene more or less steered by the avant-garde, makes comparison difficult between the "historical avant-garde" and a potential neo-avant-garde. In order to analyse the new avant-gardes one needs to contextualize their methods, in the same manner as Bürger historicized the historical avant-garde, but without positioning – as he does – what one historicizes as a norm for movements that follow. Hal Foster, in the light of the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, as elaborated by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, argues that the historical avant-garde can only be understood by the insights we can obtain from the neo-avant-garde reaction to this in the 1960s.<sup>36</sup> This is a damaging critique of Peter Bürger's project since, in the case of Foster, it seems as though Bürger is in fact describing exactly the same neo-avant-garde that he is criticizing. Amazingly, the process of *Nachträglichkeit* is clarified by Bürger's own argumentation when he discusses how the isolation and institutionalization of art was made obvious by the reaction of the avant-garde to *l'art pour l'art* that preceded it. This insight about the processes of history is made even more remarkable when he subsequently locks up the dialectical process by proclaiming the historical avant-garde as the norm for followers.

Bürger did, however, narrow the analysis down, placing it under a magnifying glass where not much escapes the eye of the analyser. His theory has become the eye of the needle through which everyone who wants to analyse the phenomenon of the avant-garde has to pass. But today, when this passage occurs in current debate, the time has come to broaden the view again in order to make it possible to perceive the issue in a larger perspective.<sup>37</sup> I therefore want to propose a rereading of the Romance-speaking theoreticians, who – for reasons

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35 Bürger 1984, p. 109, not 4.

36 The notion of "Nachträglichkeit", as discussed by Freud and Lacan, describes the inability or impossibility of understanding a trauma when it strikes a human being, that it can only be understood – post-traumatically – at a later moment: Foster 1996, *passim*.

37 The earlier-mentioned Rodopi books on the neo-avant-garde make it absolutely clear that this debate really is over and done with: cf. my review in *Nordlit* no. 21 2007.

discussed above – have for the most part been neglected or misunderstood in Germanic-speaking treatises on the avant-garde. The approach of Guillermo de Torre, Paolo Chiarini, Renato Poggioli, Octavio Paz and others is broader, with a desire not to make the field of research too narrow, and they demonstrate greater awareness of the fact that avant-garde not only results in a break with tradition but also, in many ways, provides a continuous line from Romanticism. These theoreticians furthermore show that the *attempt* to understand avant-garde does not come *Nachträglich*, but actually erupts every time avant-garde movements occur: during the early twentieth century, in the 1960s and, as I shall argue in what follows, very probably in the 1990s as well.<sup>38</sup>

### Avant-garde in late modernity

In the numerous treatises on the death of the avant-garde in the 1960s and after, a basic point is usually missed, namely that the neo-avant-gardes did not react against modernity, as the historical avant-garde did, but against late modernity. Therefore, they could not possibly use the same strategies as the historical avant-garde, nor could they rely on the same means. Thus, when a neo-avant-garde appears in the US after the Second World War, with the Beat Poets, it is thoroughly American, partly building on tradition rather than breaking with it, creating its own canon, incorporating Romanticism, Walt Whitman, etc., as a reaction to a different socio-political context to that of the historical avant-gardes. This behaviour, I would say, is more of a reaction to late modernity than modernity. When it comes to determining criteria for the corresponding aesthetic movement, post-modernism, these are as vast as for avant-garde and modernism, but if one examines the initial architectural movement that later gave its name to the aesthetic movement of post-modernism, two basic criteria are similar to the avant-garde: both movements use eclecticism and they break with tradition in one way or another (modernism being one of the traditions):

For the avant-garde is a phenomenon which must be seen in relation to the broader cultural developments of its society. Just as the earlier avant-garde was an offshoot of, but antagonistic to, the dominant literary and artistic movement of modernism, the postwar avant-garde is a particular (if extreme) form of the contemporary cultural spirit known as the postmodern.

The boundaries between the recent avant-garde and postmodernism are perhaps more difficult to determine than those between the earlier avant-garde and modernism since, like the old avant-garde, postmodernism itself undermines modernist assumptions – especially modernism's cultural elitism and political conservatism, its belief in the privileged status of literary language, and its search for a transcendent or ahistorical dimension of human experience.<sup>39</sup>

These resemblances do not make the movements identical, since the main feature that separates them is the Utopian urge that is characteristic of the avant-garde, but not of post-modernism. These similarities have, however, given rise to a confusion between the notions of “avant-garde” and “post-modernism” in the American understanding of these terms. Ameri-

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38 This is evident from the similarities with the 1950s, where a debate also started after a few years' delay, when the avant-gardes showed up again. Then, as now, texts on “The (True) Death of the Avant-Garde” were written, a fact that may be interpreted as proof of the existence of the avant-garde. Rachel Schreiber. “The (True) Death of the Avant-Garde”, non published paper at the international conference of ISEA (Inter-Society for Electronic Arts), in Nagoya, Japan, in October 2002. <<http://www.mica.edu/schreiber/H>>, read 070524.

39 Charles Russell. *The Avant-Garde Today. An International Anthology*, Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1981, pp. 7–8.

cans sometimes have difficulties in perceiving that the rise of what they called post-modernism in the US is not identical to the outburst of avant-gardism in Europe at roughly the same time; they even, in some confusing cases, identify post-modernism as avant-garde, or include avant-garde under the notion of “post-modernism”, in exactly the same way as they do with the notion of “modernism”, a problem explicated by Charles Russell:

In the United States and England, which have enjoyed a generally apolitical critical tradition – a tradition strongly influenced by the precepts of high modernism – and within which there has been little significant avant-garde activity, the term postmodernism is more in vogue.<sup>40</sup>

An explicit example of the problem of separating post-modernism from the avant-garde, an example that can be used at the same time to resolve the problem, is provided by Matei Calinescu. He indicates two parallel routes for the aesthetic movements of late modernity, both of which he labelled post-modernism without making any further distinction when he (re-)wrote his book in 1987.<sup>41</sup> Twenty years later, however, it is possible to make the following distinction: there exist/ed a purely aesthetic movement which was named “post-modernism” and which reacted to modernism, and a similar movement where one “could say that the new, postmodernist avant-garde reflects at its own level the increasingly ‘modular’ structure of our mental world, in which the crisis of ideologies [...] makes it more and more difficult to establish convincing hierarchies of values”.<sup>42</sup> So, in order to be able to recognize the avant-garde of today, one has to differentiate between art movements that can be categorized within the American notion of post-modernism and “the new, postmodern[ist] avant-garde” in line with Calinescu, an avant-garde that reflects both aesthetically and politically the fundamentals of everyday life in society today, thus making it possible for us to understand the neo-avant-garde *Nachträglich*. If we are to be able to detect such an avant-garde, it is necessary to get rid of the American confusion between post-modernism and the parallel outburst of new avant-gardism.<sup>43</sup> This is something perceived clearly by German authors such as Andreas Huyssen, even living in the US:

The problem was compounded by the fact that experimental strategies and popular culture were no longer connected in a critical aesthetic and political project as they had been in the historical avant-garde. Popular culture was accepted uncritically [...] and postmodernist experimentation had lost the avant-gardist consciousness that social change and the transformation of everyday life were at stake in every artistic experiment. Rather than aiming at a mediation between art and life, postmodernist experiments soon came to be valued for typically modernist features such as self-reflexivity, immanence, and indeterminacy (Ihab Hassan).<sup>44</sup>

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40 Charles Russell. *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries. The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 237.

41 The book was first published as: Matei Calinescu. *Faces of Modernity. Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, but at that time without any analysis of post-modernism.

42 Calinescu 1987, p. 146.

43 “The reception of Bürger’s text in America is an issue that deserves further study in itself, most particularly in terms of what is lost in this translation. Two aspects specifically come to mind. First, the fact that Bürger writes, first and foremost, as a literary specialist, yet has been almost entirely rewritten into the terms of the visual arts, in a way which tends to limit the problem of institutionality to the specific concrete spaces of the gallery or museum. Second, that what is in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* largely an argument with Adorno has been rewritten as an argument with Greenberg, who is of course never mentioned”, Cunningham 2006, p. 278, footnote 20.

44 Huyssen 1986, pp. 33–34.

To further illustrate the confusion about the notion of “postmodernism” arising in an Anglo-American context, I turn to Fredric Jameson’s foreword to Jean-François Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne* 1979, translated as *The Postmodern Condition* 1984.<sup>45</sup> In his foreword, Jameson insistently returns to a discussion of post-modernism, when Lyotard is actually describing the foundations of society in late modernity (*la condition post-moderne*, as he calls it), and not the aesthetic movement of postmodernism at all. Jameson’s choice of words seem to be neither linguistic lunacy nor blindness on his part, but the expression of a political agenda.<sup>46</sup> His understanding, though, must have had a huge impact on the reception of the notion of “post-modernism” in Anglo-American countries, and has probably led to frequent confusion between the notion of the aesthetic movements – post-modernism – and the notion of *the conditions* of the society – post-modern(ity) – institutionalized, it appears, in Anglo-American understanding. Since English is the *lingua franca* of late modernity, this misunderstanding thereafter had the potential to spread all over the world.

The post-war avant-gardes who are so often credited with failure, did ‘succeed’ in one very important aspect, intentionally or not: they did away with what remained of the notion of “the art work” after attacks from the “historical avant-garde”, which means that they also did away with experimentalism as an end in itself. There is, in fact, not very much left for an artist to do today, other than to use the tradition in the (passively) eclectic fashion of the postmodernists during the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> It became more or less impossible to accomplish anything substantial by “making it new” after the 1960s, as one can see from Judith Russi Kirshner’s description:

No longer does the shock of the new occur, at least not the historically defined shock in the face of avant-garde works of art; rather, “...the refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient... this is the intention of the avant-garde artist... Shock is aimed for as a stimulus to change one’s conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in a change in the life praxis”. [...]

Avant-garde strategies of shock and innovation have also been institutionalised and museums have too much vested in the structure of the art world to modify their politics and practice.<sup>48</sup>

The avant-gardists realized this: Experimentalism formed an important part of their practice, but it was never a goal *per se*. As long as it was functional, it was just one of the means to

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45 Jean-François Lyotard. *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Minuit, 1979; Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* [La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir], Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (transl.), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001 [1984].

46 Cf. Anna Katharina Schaffner’s title “Linguistic Lunacy as Transgressive Practice”, *Nordlit* no. 21 2007, pp. 103–114. “Meanwhile the title of the book, with its fashionable theme of postmodernism provocatively in evidence, opens up this subject matter, at least by implication, in the directions of aesthetics and economics, since postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured”, Jameson 2001, p. vii. Neither the French title, *Le Condition postmoderne*, nor the translated title, *The Postmodern Condition*, contain the notion of “post-modernism”, which makes Jameson’s wording quite remarkable. He himself prefers to talk about “late capitalism”, though, and most likely he has a certain *anxiety* – in the sense of Harold Bloom – about using the notion of “post-modern(ity)”, coined as it is by another theoretician. Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973.

47 “What was new in the 1970s was, on the one hand, the emergence of a culture of eclecticism, a largely affirmative postmodernism which had abandoned any claim to critique, transgression or negation; and, on the other hand, an alternative postmodernism in which resistance, critique, and negation of the status quo were redefined in non-modernist and non-avantgardist terms, terms which match the political developments in contemporary culture more effectively than the older theories of modernism”, Huyssen 1986, p. 188.

48 Judith Russi Kirshner. “The Possibility of an Avant-Garde”, *Formations* 1985: 2 Fall, p. 92.

attack “art as institution”. Today, however, when art as institution thrives on experimentalism, the “art works” of the avant-garde have been recovered by museums and other, complementary methods have to be used in the battle for an art that is integrated in everyday life. Bürger never understood the changed premises for the neo-avant-garde compared to the historical avant-garde, and today, if we in turn *really* want to understand the neo-avant-garde *Nachträglich*, as Hal Foster puts it, we have to identify the new means and methods of the avant-garde artists of today, since they are the ones who disclose this understanding in their “everyday” praxis.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I want to stress the tendency to disregard what one is actually talking about when discussing the avant-garde. The concept of avant-garde as such is usually taken for granted, while the analytical urge is directed towards an examination of the content of this term, in the supposition that it means the same in all language areas and countries. In this article I have argued against such a view by showing that instead of one notion there are at least four or five different words: the Germanic notion of “avant-garde”, with its limited inclusion of movements, versus the more open Romance notions of “avant-garde”, “avanguardia”, “vanguardia”, “vanguardia” and their Anglo-American relatives “modernism”, “high modernism” and “post-modernism”. I want specifically to emphasize the potential that lies in acknowledging these differences: a re-reading of both Romance and Germanic-speaking theories of the avant-garde ought to be a good idea, but at the same time it is vital to retain the Germanic unambiguous distinction between an avant-gardiste and modernist view of art and life, as Andreas Huyssen suggests:

Paradoxically, the 1960s, for all their attacks on modernism and the avant-garde, still stand closer to the traditional notion of the avant-garde than the archaeology of modernity so characteristic of the late 1970s. Much confusion could have been avoided if critics had paid closer attention to distinctions that need to be made between avant-garde and modernism as well as to the different relationship of each one to mass culture in the United States and Europe respectively.<sup>49</sup>

I also want to stress the difference between avant-garde and post-modernism, where the latter does not have the Utopian urge to merge life and art, which is the prime mover for an avant-garde. If we accept the (Anglo-)American understanding of “modernism”, and “post-modernism”, we shall be in a situation where modernism becomes the hegemonic term, which in its all-embracing tendency – with Friedrich Nietzsche – speaks to “Alle und Keinen”.<sup>50</sup> Instead, it is more constructive to see the mis-interpretations of the different notions, which I have exemplified through Umberto Eco and Fredric Jameson, as expressions of a *peripheral* understanding of the subject, the more so since the flip side of being the *lingua franca* of late modernity is that there is no need to learn other languages, which of course reduces the comprehension of terms in foreign languages. If one looks closely at Anglo-American treatises on modernism, it is apparent that they sometimes study a purely Anglo-American canon (James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, traced back to English Romanticism), a fact that shows that these books are not meant to explain modernism in an international perspective at all, but only in another periphery of the world.

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49 Huyssen 1986, p. 26.

50 As the famous epigram in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe* Bind IV, Mazzino Montinari & Giorgio Colli (ed.) 1999; reads.

An analytical view that instead separates the two movements of modernism and avant-garde, as achieved in the more strict Germanic sense, makes it possible to detect the actual heterogeneity of aesthetic movements in modernity, as well as in late modernity. Instead of retaining the logocentric dichotomy of centre-periphery, an understanding of the heterogeneity forces us to realize that this dichotomy is of no value, since all understandings are equally peripheral when it comes to the notion of “avant-garde” in an international perspective.<sup>51</sup> This heterogeneity has been explicitly pointed out by the Romanian theoretician Matei Calinescu in the title of his book on the subject. This is a brilliant example of the ability to recognize heterogeneity and diversity, where other thinkers have a tendency to ‘square things up’ within one or two central notions.

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51 It is the more interesting to analyse the centre versus the periphery intra-nationally, e.g. how Gösta Adrian Nilsson in Southern Sweden was excluded from the artistic field by his modernist counterparts in Stockholm, a fact that I touch on in the Introduction of *Nordlit* no. 21 2007.



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